

A steamy holiday romance from

CARA MAXWELL

*A Hesitant
Husbands Novel*

*A Very
Viscount
Christmas*

Spend this Christmastide at Carcliffe Castle...

A Very Viscount Christmas

Hesitant Husbands, Volume 4

Cara Maxwell

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If you enjoyed A Very Viscount Christmas

Also by Cara Maxwell

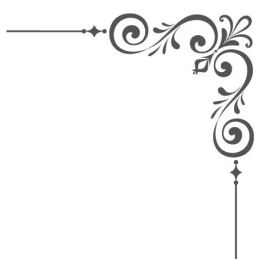
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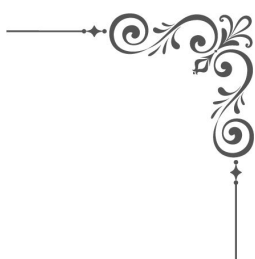
For my Bema, who made me love Christmas



The Marquess and Marchioness of Clydon request the pleasure of your company at their annual Christmas house party, beginning on Sunday, the 24th December 1815 and continuing through the celebration of Epiphany.

Christmas Feast, Winter Activities, and Twelfth Night Ball.

Carcliffe Castle, Surrey



Prologue

“Y ou’re about your wicked ways again.”

“I would hardly call them wicked,” Madison scoffed as she sealed the last of the invitations and deposited it on top of the stack in the corner of the secretary desk.

“I’ve just perused your guest list.” The Marquess of Clydon gave his wife a knowing look from across the room where he reclined on a turquoise blue damask chaise.

But the marchioness was not so easily cowed. She just smiled serenely.

“Not everyone appreciates your meddling, Madison,” her husband said pointedly.

“I have invited some of our dearest family and friends to spend the holiday season with us. I would hardly call that meddling.” She walked towards him across the room, her skirts swishing provocatively around her hips – hips that had filled out quite lusciously with the birth of their first child just over a year past.

“So you have no intentions where Miss Pratt or the Viscount are concerned?”

“Miss Pratt and Viscount Bayfield are hardly the only single people in attendance.” Madison perched herself on the end of the chaise, her hip pressing against his calf as she settled in.

“The children do not count.”

She pursed her rose-pink lips, looking down at her husband disapprovingly. With a half-cocked smile on his face, Henry reached up and twirled one of her long locks of golden blonde hair around his index finger. He tugged gently until she lowered her face down close to his.

“Can’t you just leave well enough alone, my love?” He breathed, her lips just inches from his.

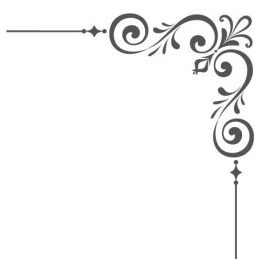
“No.” She shook her head, a mischievous gleam in her eye.

“You just want all of your friends to have their happily ever after.” Henry leaned up to kiss her, but she turned her head to the side and his lips landed on her cheek instead.

“But of course,” she whispered into his ear, her hot breath sending goosebumps through him. Henry felt his body start to respond – after all this time, his wife was still damned delectable. She slid her hand

up his chest as she leaned forward and caught his earlobe between her teeth.

Let her meddle, then.



Chapter 1

December 24th, 1815

Harriet Pratt was firmly on the shelf.

And after four long and disappointing London seasons, it seemed she was going to stay there.

She could have accepted it. She knew the standards she'd set were ridiculously high. Not everyone could have a love match the likes of the Marquess and Marchioness of Clydon. But Harriet was quite happy with the niche she had carved out in life. She had friends who kept her social calendar busy, two adorable nephews to dote upon, and a well-stocked library to occupy her time.

Yes, Harriet could have been very satisfied with the life she had cultivated. Except for her mother.

Her mother had not said a word during Harriet's first Season, when the most eligible Henry Warsham had married the vivacious incomparable Madison Hutton. Viscountess Herrin had even held her tongue during Harriet's second Season because she had been so busy planning the wedding of her younger daughter Imelda. But by Season number three, Harriet's mother started voicing her opinions. Loudly.

The nagging had gotten so bad that Harriet had taken to spending as much of the year as possible in her parent's London house even after they retired to the country. But at the holidays, Harriet had no choice but to return home and face her mother's disappointment, and more disturbingly – her pity.

Until Madison's invitation had come by the evening post in early December - ornately embossed, neatly addressed, and stamped with the Warsham family coat of arms. It was the perfect excuse to defect from her family's customary holiday gathering. For who could turn down an invitation from the Marchioness of Clydon, one of the *haute ton's* most sought-after hostesses?

Thereby, on December the twenty-fourth, Christmas Eve, Harriet found herself not at her family's county estate in Nottingham but standing in the great hall of Carcliffe Castle face to face with a medieval era suit of armor.

Madison was running around busily seeing to last-minute details. Eager to stay out of her way but also too restless to stay cooped up in the lovely room she had been assigned, Harriet wandered through the

ground floor rooms of Carcliffe Castle. It was a castle in reality, not just name: complete with a spiral staircase leading up a turret on the northeast corner and cavernous rooms with tall ceilings and heirloom wall tapestries. And of course, the aforementioned suits of armor.

Harriet stumbled across the front parlor and instantly detected her friend's unique touch. The room had been completely updated – instead of cool stone, the walls were covered in a bright turquoise blue damask. A rich ruby red carpet, with the same blue from the walls reflected in the border motif, was plush and thick beneath her feet. The room was furnished with bright cherry wood chairs and a matching writing desk. An amply stuffed sofa and chaise were grouped around an ornately carved fireplace. The fireplace appeared to be the only remnant of the room's medieval design. Of course, the Warsham's servants had built up a roaring fire. Fires burned in every room, Harriet noticed as she explored. It must take a small forest to keep the immense stone building warm and cozy during the snowy winter season.

Her book tucked under her arm, Harriet picked a plump, welcoming wingback chair that faced the window. Settling in, she congratulated herself on her choice of location for a midmorning respite. Ensnared in the corner of Madison's snug parlor, she had the warmth from the fire at her left and a view of the snow-covered grounds on her right. Harriet popped open her book and started to read.

A maid found her about an hour later as she made her rounds stoking the fires. "Hello, miss," the maid smiled sweetly, curtsying and then making her way over to the fire. Harriet watched her with a smile on her face; all of the servants she had met since arriving at Carcliffe Castle seemed so imperturbably happy. She wondered if holiday bonuses had been distributed early this year.

The fire crackled as the maid added new logs, but another sound caught Harriet's attention. She turned back to the window. Over the crest of the hill, a few hundred yards in the distance, a carriage appeared. *How could she possibly have heard that?* It was much too far away. The windows were closed tightly against the December chill. It must just have been a coincidence. She hadn't *really* heard anything; she happened to look over at just the right moment.

"Miss?"

"Hmm?" Harriet turned abruptly back to the maid. "Pardon me?"

"I asked if you would like some tea, miss," the maid said, her brow slightly furrowed.

"Oh! Yes, of course. I am sorry, I was distracted."

"That tends to happen here, miss," the maid said, her brow smoothing as she smiled knowingly.

“Here?” Harriet slipped her finger inside her book to hold her page. This conversation had taken an odd turn.

“At Carcliffe Castle. It can be a bit mysterious.” The maid stood up from where she knelt at the fireplace, dusting off her hands on her starched white apron. “Shall I bring some scones as well, with the tea?” She asked nonchalantly, as if references to mysterious castles were completely commonplace.

Harriet nodded slowly. “Yes, that would be nice. Thank you ...?”

“Ada,” the young woman supplied.

“Thank you, Ada.”

Young Ada the maid curtsied again and then retreated from the room to fetch the tea service.

Turning back to the window, Harriet saw that the carriage was now rounding the curve of the drive. The coachman pulled up on the reins and the two horses came to a halt. They were beautiful animals, even to Harriet’s untrained eyes. She was not much of an equestrian, but it was clear that whoever owned the carriage and team of horses was.

Harriet was a little surprised when the carriage door swung open and a woman climbed down without waiting for the butler to greet the carriage or offer his hand. She had never met Madison’s sister, but she felt certain this was Meera. She had the same golden blonde hair, though hers was elaborately coiffed beneath a black velvet hat, whereas Madison nearly always wore hers loose around her shoulders.

The man who climbed out behind her took Harriet’s breath away. He was like Adonis come to life – golden hair, tanned skin, tall, muscular build. Harriet tried to remember his name. She was sure she had met him before, during one of her many seasons *oh well*. Madison would surely introduce them.

Meera was already halfway up the front steps, while her husband lagged behind, giving instructions to the groom who had come forward to assist their coachman. They both looked rather tanned, Harriet observed, considering it was the dead of a typically dreary English winter.

Somewhere in the distance, Harriet heard the sound of the two-story-tall wooden front doors of Carcliffe Castle opening and the excited squeals of sisters reunited. She’d give them space for their family reunion, she decided, sinking deeper into her chair.

Ada returned a few minutes later with her tea. Harriet poured herself a steaming cup. She smiled when she saw the little pot of honey on the tray. Madison must have given her staff notes on her guests – honey was not a usual occupant on an English tea tray. Drizzling it in with a relaxed sigh, Harriet opened her book back up and continued reading.

She did not hear the next carriage until it was stopped and the occupants were spilling out. A portly middle-aged man, a bonneted, dour-faced woman Harriet could only assume was his wife, and a teenage girl. No family resemblance this time, though she did spot Lord Warsham on the step, shaking the other man's hand jovially.

Harriet had not thought to ask Madison how many people would be attending the house party. She had been in too much of a hurry to accept. Besides, after four years of London seasons, Harriet felt perfectly confident getting along with anyone and everyone.

She sipped her tea with honey and read her book as midmorning gave way to early afternoon. There was a lull in arriving guests. Then several carriages appeared at once: Harriet recognized Madison's elder sister Leonora and her husband, whom she had met several times in London. From one large carriage spilled two women, one man, and four children. Harriet surmised that these must be some of Henry's sisters, who were all older than he and had well-established families.

The afternoon light was just taking on a golden tint – signaling the arrival of early evening – when Harriet decided to close her book and go seek some afternoon repast. Madison said they kept country hours, so the evening meal was not terribly far off. But Harriet had gotten lost in her book.

She was halfway to the door, sad to leave her cozy nook but her stomach making loud accusations of neglect, when she heard the rapid, repetitive sounds of hoofbeats coming down the drive. Despite her hunger, something pulled her back towards the window.

He was riding in at a full gallop. *Why was the man in such a hurry?* The lane leading down to Carcliffe Castle was long. He still had plenty of time to slow down. But what was the rush to arrive at a quiet country house party?

The horse and rider drew closer but still they did not slow. Harriet could see the man astride the horse more clearly now. A dark riding costume. It was impossible to tell where his breeches ended and his riding boots began. She could see the light shining off the polished leather of his boots. He wore no top hat. If he had, it would surely have been lost at the speed he was riding.

Instead, she could see close-cropped brown hair. None of the roguish long locks that Henry liked to sport. Nor the golden crown of hair Harriet had seen earlier on Meera's husband. He looked very proper and practical. That was her first impression of the unknown man.

And that he rode at a ridiculously breakneck pace.



“MY BROTHER, THE LAST to arrive. I never thought I would see the

day.” Christopher clapped the other man on the back and pulled him into a gruff, brotherly hug.

“I was held up seeing to a tenant. Being away from the estate during the coldest winter in memory is not ideal,” Lee said in his own defense as he shrugged off his heavy wool overcoat into the hands of a waiting footman.

“I am sure they will get on perfectly fine without you,” Meera said as she leaned in to kiss her brother-in-law’s cheek. “Even a viscount deserves a holiday.”

“That coming from the two that are perpetually on holiday,” Lee scoffed, but he squeezed Meera’s arm and returned her kiss. He was quite pleased that things had finally come to rights for his brother. He’d watched Christopher struggle for years with loneliness, wearing the cloak of a rakehell did not suit him nearly as well as the one of doting husband.

Lee looked around the cavernous entry hall of Carcliffe Castle. He had been here only once before, the year that Madison and Henry were married. “Where is Lady Clydon?”

A mischievous look came over Meera’s face. “She is seeing to little Nora, so I get to play hostess.”

Lee’s dark eyebrows shot up. He was the other side of his younger brother’s coin. Where Christopher was golden with locks curving around his ears, Lee was dark with short-cropped hair that his valet trimmed neatly on a regular schedule. The two men had one thing in common – their piercingly blue eyes. And at this moment, both those sets of eyes were giving Meera a very skeptical look.

But Meera would not be cowed. She cleared her throat and raised her chin as she spoke. “Michaelson, please see Viscount Bayfield settled. I believe my sister told me he would be staying in the Mayberry Room.”

Michaelson, the middle-aged butler who had first started at Carcliffe Castle as a kitchen boy, cleared his throat awkwardly. “I beg your pardon, Mrs. Bowden. But I believe his lordship is to stay in the Alderwood Suite.”

Meera wrinkled her nose. Lee stifled his chuckle. Christopher rolled his eyes.

“Perhaps it is a good thing you married a second son. Playing hostess is apparently not your forte.” Christopher shook his head as he caught his wife’s elbow.

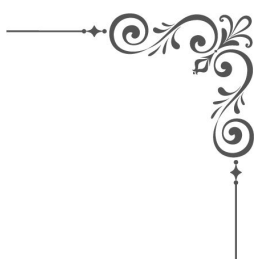
“I am sure my sister said the Mayberry Room,” Meera insisted. Poor Michaelson looked fit to burst.

“Let’s go, Meera, and let Michaelson see to it.” Christopher started to steer her back down the entry hall. “We shall see you for supper. Country hours, Madison said,” he called to his brother over his

shoulder.

Lee bowed politely to Meera as she somewhat unwillingly followed her husband's lead. Michaelson relaxed visibly.

This holiday was going to be less restive than he'd hoped. "On to the Alderwood Suite then, if you please," Lee said with a kind smile.



Chapter 2

Countryside hours meant dinner began at promptly five o'clock in the evening. Lee was ready at the exact appointed time. He felt quite bad for his late appearance this afternoon. He'd specifically written to Madison to ask when he ought to arrive and then he had completely failed to show up within the agreed window. He was sure that Madison would brush it off. She was the consummate hostess. But that did not alter Lee's determination to apologize to her as soon as he arrived downstairs.

Lee took one last look in the mirror – he'd dismissed his valet a few moments ago – and confirmed that everything about his appearance was neat and tidy. *Good.*

The suite of rooms he'd been given was quite extravagant. Lee guessed that they were the most desirable rooms the castle had to offer outside of those reserved to the marquess and marchioness. He shook his head. There was a comfortably furnished sitting room that led into a bedroom and connecting dressing room. Much more ornate than he needed as a single man. There were surely couples and families in attendance that would have made better use of the space. But there was nothing to be done now. If he protested he would just make Madison and any other attendees awkward.

Lee sighed and opened the door, which was also ornately carved with a depiction of a hunting scene, and stepped into the hallway. He'd carefully paid attention to Michaelson's footpath as he'd been escorted upstairs earlier. He was confident he could find his way back downstairs easily.

There were two paintings on the left – both biblical – then he would turn right and walk past four doors. Lee counted each one as he walked: one, two, three ... *where was the fourth door?* He turned around and looked behind him, certain that he must have miscounted as he walked quickly. No, there were only three doors. Then the hallway offered three possible paths – straight ahead, to the left up a spiral staircase, and then a hallway to the right. Obviously, he needed to go downstairs rather than up. A spiral staircase was quite memorable.

He must have been distracted when he followed Michaelson upstairs. Lee chided himself for his rudeness and turned right as he

had planned to all along.

Lee froze in the middle of the corridor. This was not the way he had come this afternoon. The hallway he'd walked down had been equipped with modern gas lamps. But here were candles burning in sconces. This part of the castle had not been updated. His brow furrowed – an expression that had already graced his face far too often during this supposed holiday.

“Are you lost, sir?”

Lee nearly jumped out of his skin.

He whipped around, trying to locate the source of the voice.

She was framed by a doorway carved with rose-shaped flourishes. Dressed in a gray so pale it was almost white, she looked like an angel with the candlelight from the walls casting long shadows across the corridor. Indeed, that dark blonde hair was a bit like a halo. She'd even twisted it back from her temples so that it formed a little circlet around the crown of her head.

“Are you lost?” The angel woman repeated more slowly, looking at him sympathetically. She must think him a complete dolt.

“I am not lost,” Lee said equally slowly.

She did not believe him. “You meant to head in the opposite direction of supper?”

Lee could not quite see the color of her eyes in the dim lighting. If they were brown, they must be a light, almost hazel shade. If they were blue, they were certainly darker and more soulful than his own.

He was certain he had not taken a wrong turn. But he was not about to refute the angelic apparition. “Carcliffe Castle is known to be a bit of a maze,” Lee said instead.

The woman smiled but somehow still managed to show a hint of skepticism; she seemed to know she was being practiced upon. “I was just about to walk down myself, sir. Perhaps we could go together.”

“I would be delighted.” He leaned forward in a very formal bow. “I am Leland Bowden, Viscount Bayfield. I do not believe we have met before, Miss ...”

“Miss Pratt,” she supplied. “Miss Harriet Pratt, daughter of Viscount Herrin.” She matched his bow with a well-practiced curtsy.

“I am most pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Pratt.” As he spoke, Lee glanced at the grandfather clock that conveniently stood along the wall between him and her doorway.

Harriet bit her lip to keep from scoffing at him. “Am I making you late, Lord Bayfield?”

Lee cleared his throat awkwardly. He did not usually consider himself so obvious, but the woman was damnably perceptive. “I believe Lady Clydon indicated we should dine at five o'clock.”

The woman's smile deepened. “Indeed, she did.”

Behind his back, Lee drummed his thumbs repetitively atop his tightly grasped fists. Harriet Pratt watched him from under eyebrows several shades darker than her hair with a look of amusement on her face.

Finally, she released his gaze and did let a little laugh escape. "Let us go down, my lord Viscount."

Lee relaxed visibly and started striding down the corridor, only to pause a few moments later at the intersection of hallways when he realized that he did not remember how to get to where they were going. Harriet followed on his heels. She nodded down the hallway on the right – away from the direction of the Alderwood Suite where Lee was lodged.

How curious, Lee thought to himself. This was not how he remembered coming upstairs at all. But sure enough, the broad staircase leading into Carcliffe Castle's grand entry hall appeared just a few moments later.

Harriet went to one side of the staircase, holding onto the highly polished banister rather than wait for Viscount Bayfield to offer his arm. A bit put off, Lee came down the stairs a few paces below her.

"Arie! I wondered if we had misplaced you!" Madison exclaimed from the doorway of the parlor. One glance around the room confirmed that Miss Pratt and Lord Bayfield were the last to arrive for the evening meal.

Harriet leaned forward and touched cheeks familiarly with Madison, followed quickly by a similar greeting from her husband, Henry. Although when Harriet and Madison debuted together they had both initially set their sights on the handsome and affable Marquess of Clydon, it had been Madison Hutton who won his heart. Years later, Harriet bore not an ounce of ill will towards the beautiful couple.

Rather, they were the standard against which she measured all potential relationships. It was why she had not married after all of these years on the London marriage mart. She had not yet met a man who measured up.

"I was waylaid by Viscount Bayfield," Harriet said cheekily. Beside her, she felt said viscount tense. *He really did not like being late*, she mused.

Madison glowed. Beside her, Henry rolled his eyes. Both Harriet and Lee caught this byplay and wondered at it.

"We keep things casual here in the country," Henry said genially. "Let us all go through." He motioned towards the double doors that led into the formal dining room. Perfectly in sync, two footmen opened the two-story-tall doors. Henry offered his arm to his wife and started to lead the party in to dine.

As Lee waited for his turn – he would of course enter behind the Earl of Willingham and his wife – he realized that he had forgotten to apologize to Madison for his earlier tardiness. Rather, he had repeated the behavior. He glanced over at the enchanting Miss Pratt, waiting demurely to enter the dining room. *No, this was not going to be the restful retreat he had hoped for.*

DESPITE LADY CLYDON'S insistence that this holiday house party was a casual affair, the formal dining room of Carcliffe Castle argued otherwise. Although there were sixteen attendees old enough to be seated at the evening meal this still left more than half of the seats at the grand table unoccupied. When Harriet entered and found her seat, she was unsurprised to find herself seated beside Viscount Bayfield. It was exactly the type of nonsense that Madison thrived on. The man was clearly unmarried. As was she. And Madison had been overly invested in her romantic prospects since their very first season.

On her other side was Leonora, which Harriet was thankful for. Lady Avery was a comforting and steady presence at any event.

"Arie, dear, I was so pleased that your mother allowed you to join us this year." Leonora called Harriet by her preferred nickname, warming Harriet immediately. Harriet had always seemed like a name for a grandmother rather than a young woman. *Well, perhaps not so young anymore.* Twenty-four in the *ton* was practically matronly.

"Truthfully, I was quite pleased to escape her myself. She has become rather hawkish," Arie said as the first course was set in front of her. She smiled kindly up at the footman who served her.

"She is still quite preoccupied with your status?" Leonora shook her head knowingly.

Arie nodded, her dark gold hair glinting as she inclined her head. "I suppose it is a mother's duty, to see her daughters well married. But she and I have distinctly different definitions of the word '*well*.'"

"You've taken to Maddie's insistence on a love match, have you?"

Madison glanced at them from across the table when she heard her name, but apparently found them satisfactory because she turned back to Theodore Alston and continued her conversation.

"I have certain standards," Arie said.

Leonora chuckled and then turned the conversation to other topics.

Meanwhile, Viscount Bayfield was rather less satisfied by his seating arrangements. The luminous Miss Pratt was on his left, but she was wholly engaged in conversation with the middle-aged woman on her other side.

"Have you ever been to Carcliffe Castle before, Lord Bayfield? Isn't it just magical!" The young woman on his other side chattered

eagerly. *Girl*, he amended himself. Miss Susan Wilks might technically be old enough to be seated at a country supper with her elders, but she was a far cry from the perfect illustration of womanhood on his left.

Good lord, where were these thoughts coming from? Lee had never been given to such romanticism. He was intensely focused, polite, and practical. And yet, even in their short exchange, he found Miss Pratt fascinating.

"My lord?" Susan asked, leaning forward in her chair. Despite her age, she was well aware of her physical charms. The almost-woman had dark-shiny hair that was artfully arranged and left a few tendrils hanging around her temples and ears. As she spoke to the viscount, she twirled one silky lock around her finger and pouted out her lips so they looked fuller.

She was a pretty girl, Lee could acknowledge. But a girl, nonetheless.

He cleared his throat awkwardly. "I have been here once before."

Susan cast her eyes upward at the high vaults of the stone ceiling and then turned her dreamy gaze back to Lee. "It is quite romantic. I can only imagine how many nooks and hidden retreats there are to be found." She looked directly at Lee, her meaning quite clear.

Lee swallowed hard. "Miss Pratt, have you met Miss Wilks?"

Arie turned to them midsentence, her mouth still open as she was in the middle of speaking to Lady Avery. She glanced between Lord Bayfield and the young woman seated beside him and instantly read the look of dismay in the former's eyes.

"I have not yet had the pleasure," Arie said slowly. She smiled at the younger woman. "How lovely that your parents have permitted you to join us here at Carcliffe Castle, Miss Wilks. I assume you will be making your debut this coming season?"

Susan's sunny demeanor faltered. She did not like being reminded of the fact that she was not actually out in society yet and her inclusion in the adult activities was not a given. "Yes, I will be presented at court this spring. You must have been through so many seasons yourself, Miss Pratt, do you have any words of wisdom to share with a young debutante?" The girl smiled sweetly, her rouged lips curving upward in a carefully practiced expression.

"Do not be too eager."

Susan's dark brows furrowed and her lips tightened into a pout. She turned sharply away and began to speak to her mother.

Arie did not miss the implied insult about her age, but she was much too seasoned to be bothered by it. She did not roll her eyes, but the sentiment must have read clearly enough on her face because beside her Lord Bayfield breathed out a little chuckle.

"I have you to thank yet again, Miss Pratt."

"You do seem to lose your way quite often," Arie quipped, reaching for her glass of wine. She took a sip as she assessed Lord Leland Bowden, Viscount Bayfield. He was undeniably handsome, though in a much quieter way than his younger brother. He was a very proper soul. Dressed just so, sitting up perfectly straight – all decorum, this gentleman was. It was not necessarily a bad thing, Arie supposed. She just found that as she got more comfortable up on her shelf, she cared less and less for the strictures of social decorum. Propriety was all well and good until it got in the way of practicality.

"I have an excellent sense of direction," Viscount Bayfield contended over his own wine glass.

"Perhaps just a knack for getting yourself into tricky situations, then."

"If it means you will be there to get me out of them, Miss Pratt –"

"Did I just hear that you lost your way, Lee?" Christopher jumped into the conversation from across the table.

"Surprised, Christopher?"

"Naturally. My brother always has a handle on things."

"Who said I didn't?"

"It sounded like Miss Pratt did." Meera sunk her elbow hard into her husband's side but the grin stayed on his face.

Despite her stated ambivalence, Arie felt her cheeks color.

"Miss Pratt has been beyond gracious and kind," Lee complimented.

Christopher wrinkled his brow. "Have we met before, Miss Pratt? You look quite familiar ..."

"Not officially, I don't believe so. But I'm sure I saw you in London around the time that Madison and I made our debuts," Arie answered, thankful for the change of subject.

"Yes, I remember now. I apologize for not recalling."

"You were not particularly interested in debutantes in those days, if memory serves," Arie said with a devilish glint in her eye.

Now it was Christopher's turn to blush. Beside him, Meera threw her head back and laughed loudly. Lee joined in, enjoying his brother's discomfiture immensely.

Christopher took it in good humor.

Lee raised his glass to Arie in salutation. "Well played, Miss Pratt."

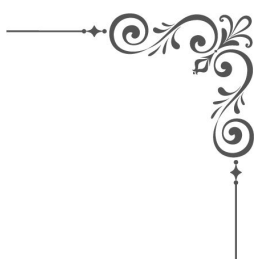
The other three raised their glasses good-naturedly and took a drink.

"Does anyone feel a bit cold?" Meera set down her glass and rubbed up and down her bare arms to generate friction. Her daring emerald green gown dipped low over her bosom and had only the gauziest of taffeta cap sleeves – very fetching but hardly suited for a

drafty English castle in December. Christopher put his arm around her instinctively.

There was a loud *crash* from somewhere beyond, near the front of Carcliffe Castle. Henry got to his feet immediately, a concerned look upon his handsome face. As he started for the corridor, Madison tossed aside her napkin and quickly followed him.

As the door to the corridor opened, a thick gust of wind whipped through the dining room. Now Meera was not the only one shivering. Then Madison's shriek echoed through the stone walls.



Chapter 3

The guests hurried as one from the dining room and out through the corridor in the grand entryway. Both of the two-story-tall thick wooden castle doors had been thrown open and frigid winter wind was gusting into the hall. A tall, dark figure was silhouetted in the doorway of the castle. A hat was pulled low over his brow, his face in shadow. The women took an assembled gasp, grasping their husbands.

Arie was wide-eyed. She was subconsciously aware of Lord Bayfield stepping closer to her, moving so he was standing just in front of her – subtly offering his protection. Despite the rapid pace of her thumping heart, she felt a little flutter in her stomach.

“Drake Thornton, you beast!” Madison’s voice rang out shrilly.

The mysterious figure took two steps forward into the entryway, pulling off his hat and shaking his head.

This time the gasp from the assembled ladies was entirely complimentary.

The man before them was dashing handsome – the kind of creature that romance authors wrote about – too perfect to be real. His dark hair was long and silky. A small club of hair was tied at the nape of his neck but most of it had escaped and was falling forward in unruly waves around his olive-skinned face. His dark eyes were set under a heavy brow ridge that cast them in an enigmatic and alluring shadow.

When he spoke, the deep tenor of his voice was velvety smooth. “I do apologize most profusely, Lady Clydon. I meant to slip in without disturbing anyone but it seems the castle has a mind all its own.”

Madison shook her head but an indulgent smile appeared on her face. Henry stepped forward and shook the man’s hand heartily. “Welcome to Carcliffe Castle, Mr. Thornton.”

“I am deeply honored by the invitation.” Drake bowed so low before the marchioness that his nose almost touched the ground. “I was held up in Brighton. I assumed you would all be at supper and did not want to make a ruckus by pounding on the doors, but here you all are.” He smiled then, revealing two rows of perfectly white teeth and a strong jawline. Susan Wilks whimpered aloud.

For all his protest, Drake looked quite pleased with the attention he was receiving. Every single adult member of the house party was

standing in the entry hall looking at him in awe.

Well, except for perhaps Lee.

He folded his arms across his body while a distinct look of disapproval took up residence on his own handsome face. Lee was not buying into this man's charade one bit. He knew a rakehell when he saw one. Hell, his brother had spent the better part of a decade playing the part in London.

And while Christopher had fully reformed and was happily married now, one look at this Drake fellow was enough to assure Lee that he was not to be trusted. At least around the respectable ladies in attendance this Christmastide.

"You must come join us in the dining room." Madison motioned back towards where the group had come. Servants had arrived and were busy closing and locking the doors, taking Mr. Thornton's coat, and in general looking put out.

Drake looked down at his traveling attire. "I am not properly dressed. I look quite rumpled, I am sure."

Lee snorted aloud. Both Arie and Susan glanced over at him and he tried to cover it with a cough into his hand. Drake may be wearing traveling garb, but it was of the highest quality and fashionable cut. He looked as dapper as any dandy promenading in Hyde Park.

Henry shook his head and started ushering the group back towards the dining room. "We've only had the first course. You're surely famished."

Accepting with a smile – he'd never truly intended to decline – Drake joined the party as they settled back into their places at the long formal dining table.

Once everyone was seated again, wine glasses refilled and the second course served, Madison assumed the role of hostess once more. "Mr. Thornton, I don't believe you are acquainted with any of our other guests. If you will allow me to introduce ..." she trailed off, an expectant smile on her face.

"Of course, Lady Clydon, I would be most honored. Most honored," Drake said effusively, flashing that dashing smile again.

Madison addressed the group at large: "Mr. Thornton's and Henry's fathers were great friends. They met while touring India in their youth and maintained lifelong correspondence. When Drake mentioned he was going to be in London alone this Christmas, I couldn't fathom such a thing and invited him to join us."

The Marchioness then motioned to her immediate left. "Sir Thomas Joyce and Lady Helen Joyce, Henry's elder sister and her husband. Lady Erica Rith, one of Henry's other sisters." Further down she nodded to the rotund father-figure Arie had seen Henry greet so jovially earlier that afternoon. "Mr. Winston Wilks, his wife Elizabeth,

and their daughter Susan. Mr. Wilks manages one of Henry's most profitable companies."

Arie chanced a glance over at Lord Bayfield as Madison continued her introductions. He'd been wearing that sour look on his face ever since Mr. Thornton's arrival. What was that about? Arie wondered. Did he know something about the man that the rest of them did not?

"...my sister Leonora, Lady Avery, and her husband Edmund, Lord Avery. The Earl of Willingham has been friends with Henry since they were at school and his lovely wife Kelly has become a dear friend of mine..."

Lee was listening to the introductions attentively. Having arrived just moments before they went through to the dining room, there had not been time for him to be introduced to all of the other attendees. He was carefully committing each name and title to memory so he could address everyone correctly.

"—ah, and this lovely creature must be your sister, Lady Clydon. No one could miss the resemblance," Drake broke in, looking appreciatively at Meera as Madison proceeded down the table.

Christopher cleared his throat loudly. "Mrs. Bowden, my wife. Christopher Bowden, at your service," he said, his polite words belied by his hard tone.

But Drake was unfazed. He simply smiled and inclined his head. "A pleasure to meet you both, sir."

"This is my dear friend, Miss Harriet Pratt, daughter of Viscount Herrin. And just beside her Viscount Bayfield, Leland Bowden, is Christopher's elder brother and a childhood friend." Madison finished her introductions, looking quite satisfied with herself. The table's occupants slowly drifted back into their conversations with one another until the room was humming pleasantly again.

Drake had been seated near the middle of the table, in the unoccupied seat beside Winston Wilks. He was diagonally adjacent from Arie, but that did not deter him. He leaned forward and spoke to her directly. "If Lady Clydon had mentioned she was going to have an angel in attendance, I would have made sure to arrive on time," he said.

Arie blushed fiercely at the outlandish compliment. She'd experienced more than her fair share of attention from ardent suitors, but Drake was perhaps the most forward she'd ever encountered.

"Such kind words, when you've yet to hear a single word from my mouth!" Arie exclaimed. She thought she felt Lord Bayfield shake with laughter next to her, but he kept his face neutral.

"I doubt that any words you could say would sway my opinion." Drake smiled roguishly as he reached for his wineglass, his eyes never leaving her.

His gaze was so intense, Arie swept her eyes downward. Her long eyelashes were thick and dark, and the motion quite pretty. Lee felt a rush of attraction followed quickly by another of disappointment. Was the lovely Miss Pratt actually interested in Mr. Thornton?

BY THE TIME THE PARTY adjourned to the library, Lee's mood had soured considerably. Despite Mr. Thornton's brash impropriety, Miss Pratt had continued to speak with him throughout the remaining courses of the meal. Meanwhile, the overly eager Susan had plied him with one gushing platitude after another. The girl was smitten with him. And while he did feel a certain amount of endearment towards her – who hadn't looked upon a sophisticated elder with adoring eyes at some point in their youth? – she was getting to be damnably annoying.

Rather than remaining at the table while the ladies adjourned to another room, the entire party followed the Marquess and Marchioness of Clydon through the double doors of the dining room and across a long gallery. On the floor was a thick emerald green carpet patterned with heraldic golden angels around the edges. Here too the holiday décor had been applied profusely. On either side of the gallery were larger-than-life portraits of past marquesses and their wives. The paintings were hung with boughs of evergreen. Between each portrait was a long paned glass window about the width of a grown man's arm-span. In the daylight, they would offer a view of the castle's courtyard on one side and the snowy countryside on the other. In the dark of the midwinter evening, they were alight with sparkling candles that reflected off the glass and created a shimmering and shining effect as the guests moved along the gallery.

Arie paused about halfway down the room. She had been talking to Leonora and her husband Edmund, but they moved on while she lingered in front of a particular portrait. It was unique. Instead of the tall depictions of lords and ladies in the prime of their life, it depicted a singular woman of advanced age, seated, ornately dressed, and flanked on either side by regal-looking dogs – small greyhounds, Arie thought.

Lee glanced around, feeling sure that Drake was lurking somewhere nearby. But he seemed to have been drawn into conversation by Winston, young Susan's father, and was much further along the hall. Despite her apparent interest in the new arrival, Lee found himself drawn towards Miss Pratt.

"She's quite impressive," Lee observed as he came to stand beside her.

"I was just thinking nearly the same thing." Arie pursed her lips as

she considered the portrait. Lee instantly imagined what those lips would feel like, pushed out like that and pressed against his own. "I wonder who she was ..."

"A grand dame of the *ton*, certainly."

"She is not wearing a wedding ring."

"Some women don't."

"That is true."

"Perhaps she was a widow."

"Perhaps ..." Arie echoed, but somehow, she felt sure that this woman was not a widow. She felt a distinct kinship with this stately elderly woman. Something in the way she held herself with such complete confidence spoke to the younger woman's soul.

"You admire her," Lee said softly.

Arie glanced over at him quickly. She was surprised at his astuteness. "It's silly to admire a person in a painting," she scoffed at herself. But as she turned her body, moving naturally to face him as they spoke, her eyes were caught in his gaze. The flickering candlelight had turned his piercing blue eyes to a deeper sapphire hue. Arie thought of the seaside and the deep blue of the crashing waves at twilight. The waves of the ocean in her mind seemed to match the pulsing of her heart, which had sped up considerably.

"If you will all please join us in the library, we will light the Yule Log." Henry's voice echoed down the long gallery, where guests were at various points of making their way down towards the now open doors.

Lee turned towards Henry's voice but Arie did not react as quickly. His shoulder bumped into hers, their arms colliding and their hands grazing against one another. Even through her evening gloves, Arie felt the heat of Lee's skin.

Lee cleared his throat – a particular habit of his, Arie realized – and stepped back quickly. "I apologize, Miss Pratt. I did not mean any impropriety –"

Arie laughed. "Of course, you didn't, Lord Bayfield." She reached out and took his arm, inclining her head down the hall towards the library. "Try to relax a bit, my lord. This is meant to be a holiday, after all."

"How can one relax around a woman like you?" Lee challenged. He felt Arie stiffen on his arm. He looked down at her frantically, hardly able to believe such forward words had come out of his mouth.

"You're making strides already."

She was laughing, Lee realized.

That feeling inside of him, something like a candle that had been lit when he first saw her silhouetted angelically in the upstairs corridor, blazed to life. It was quickly becoming a steady flame.

As they entered the library, Arie smiled and thanked Lord Bayfield before detaching her arm and drifting towards where Leonora and Meera were seated on a settee chatting. She perched on the edge of an ottoman beside them, nodding along but not joining the conversation. Her mind and heart were racing in unison.

Lord Leland Bowden, Viscount Bayfield, was not so different than the myriads of other men she had met during her long sojourn among London's *haute ton*. That was what Arie told herself. The way her heart was beating rapidly and her stomach was fluttering away like a bird in flight ... well, she'd certainly been attracted to men before. She remembered the first time with a smile: the very same Henry Warsham who stood beside the library's grand fireplace at that very moment.

She sensed someone approaching behind her and felt a little thump in her chest – thinking it was Lord Bayfield come to continue their conversation. But as Arie turned her body, she realized that her new companion was the darkly handsome Drake Thornton instead.

"I thought you might have gotten lost, Mr. Thornton, so long were you gone from my side." Arie could have moved over to make room for him to sit beside her on the ottoman, but she did not. She did not dislike Mr. Thornton, exactly. She found him rather entertaining. His brash forwardness might be successful at sweeping younger maidens from their feet, but he was not the first rogue she had met. Still, he was distinctly safer than Lord Bayfield; he inspired none of the same fluttering within her.

"Nothing could keep me from the glow of your company." Drake grinned through any potential awkwardness. There was another sofa opposite the one that Leonora and Meera sat on but it was several feet away from the ottoman on which Arie was perched. Drake appeared unbothered. He simply lifted the end of the sofa and pulled it closer so that when he did sit down and leaned forward with his elbow on the sofa's cushioned arm his face was mere inches from hers.

"I am not sure Lady Clydon will appreciate you rearranging her furniture," Arie observed from under arched eyebrows.

"I am getting quite good at offering apologies to the lovely marchioness." Drake's olive skin was complimented by the low lighting in the room. His dark hair curled lusciously around the collar of his shirt. Arie could certainly see his appeal, though she was not as drawn in by it as she would have been a few years earlier.

"Perhaps you ought to reflect on that fact."

Drake laughed, exposing his rows of gleaming white teeth. "Or just lean into it? Do you think the marchioness would notice if I stole you away for a moment? I noticed a kissing bough –"

Thankfully the aforementioned marchioness chose that moment to

clap her hands and call the room to attention. "Beloved family, dear friends, we thank you for joining us this holiday season. There is no greater gift than to be surrounded by those you love." Madison reached down and squeezed Henry's hand as she spoke.

"By lighting this Yule log, we begin the season of Christmastide." The candles and gas lamps throughout the library were suddenly doused. The only source of light in the room was a singular taper which the butler was handing to Henry. Henry crouched down before the fireplace and carefully lit the kindling below the thick log. As it slowly caught fire and the flames flickered up and around the edges of the log, Henry stood back up and turned to his guests. "May this season be one of entertainment, prosperity, love, and joy!"

The group broke into applause. Henry turned and pulled Madison against him, kissing her thoroughly.

Now that the Yule log was catching ablaze and its light began to fill the room, the guests could see various members of the Warsham's staff around the library. They had been carefully stationed to darken the room at just the particular moment. It was quite an impressive spectacle.

The Yule log itself would be tended throughout the night, for it would be considered bad luck if it was allowed to go dark before entirely burning away. When the guests assembled the next morning for breakfast, the fire should still be warm and bright.

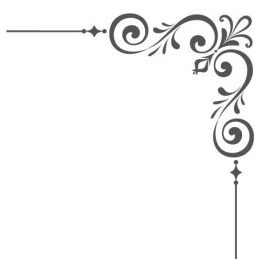
From where he stood speaking to Theodore, Earl of Willingham, Lee could see only the back of Miss Pratt's head. But it was tilted to the side, forming a little triangle with Drake's as he leaned in to speak to her. As the fire blazed to life, Lee watched Drake reach out and lay his hand on Miss Pratt's arm. She did not reciprocate. Nor did she pull away.

The flame inside of Lee that had lit when he first met Harriet Pratt grew in parallel with the burning log before them. All of his life, he had been waiting for the right woman. Then she had appeared before him like an angel. He would be damned if he would let a rakehell like Thornton get in the way.

Lee accepted a glass of sherry from a liveried footman and took a long, fortifying drink. *Let the yuletide season commence.*



*On the first day of Christmas my true love sent to me
A partridge in a pear tree ...*



Chapter 4

December 25th, 1815

“Happy Christmas!” Madison took both of Lee’s hands in hers and drew him close, touching cheeks familiarly.

Lee felt a rush of warmth; he had not been with his family on Christmas in several years. Christopher had been abroad with Meera and their parents were deceased. He had not spent much time with Madison since her debut and subsequent marriage, but the fact that she still treated him as family warmed him considerably.

“Happy Christmas, my dear.” Lee shook Henry’s hand and then moved past them to make room for the Earl and Countess of Willingham to greet their hosts. The guests were assembling in the grand entry hall of Carcliffe Castle in preparation for walking together to the chapel for the Christmas service.

Trying to compensate for his dual late arrivals the day before, Lee had descended the stairs a full quarter of an hour early. Now he stood in the entry hall with his hands folded neatly behind his back and just one other person – Drake Thornton.

He ought to talk with the man – greet him at least. It was rude not to and Lee prided himself on always being correct, proper, and polite. But if there was a person he less wanted to be stuck talking to ... well, it was a near competition between Drake Thornton and the persistent Susan Wilks.

Despite his inclinations, Lee squared his shoulders and cleared his throat. “Lady Clydon has done a stunning job with the holiday décor.”

Décor. It was about the blandest topic two males could discuss. And hopefully it would not engage Drake in further conversation. Fulfill the niceties and move on.

“Indeed. I am particularly fond of how many well-placed kissing boughs the marchioness has hung throughout the castle.” Drake smiled devilishly. “It is almost as if she is encouraging certain ... activities.”

Lee was not amused. “I sincerely doubt that, Mr. Thornton,” Lee said sharply. He turned away and made a show of studying a Chinese painted vase that stood in the corner.

That settled it. No more need for niceties with Drake.

The man *had* made an astute observation. From where he stood,

Lee could see a kissing bough hung over the doorway between the great hall and the front parlor. Below it, Henry and Madison stood framed in the archway, greeting their guests and exchanging sentiments of goodwill. That was, of course, the traditional meaning. A pleasant and polite exchange exactly as Lee had with the host and hostess. But rowdy young men often used the little green hanging globes to steal kisses from pretty young misses.

There had been one hanging in the library the night before. Lee could not recall if he had seen one elsewhere in the castle. But it seemed a particular attention to detail. Had Madison hung them purposefully? There were only four unwed guests in attendance aside from the children: Drake Thornton, Susan Wilks, Harriet Pratt, and himself.

If there was ever a fellow to try and draw an unsuspecting lady under the kissing bough it was certainly Drake. And he'd already made his interest in Miss Pratt quite clear. *I just have to beat him to it.*

What thoughts! Lee chastened himself. Miss Pratt was a gentile and respectable young lady; not a gentleman's plaything. And while he meant to win her – his ardent self-proclamation rang just as true this morning as it had the night before – he would do so by being himself. He would not play the rogue.

The very woman herself appeared on the staircase accompanied by Henry's sister Erica. Today she'd selected a red velvet gown that matched the spirit of the season. From the bust hung a black lace overlay that moved side to side as she walked. There were little cap sleeves at her shoulders and Lee thought he could see a generous display of creamy skin and bosom. But Arie had strategically covered it with a black shawl draped over her shoulders and secured with a ruby-encrusted brooch in the shape of a bird.

She must be fond of brooches and jewelry – Lee realized he'd seen her wearing one yesterday as well. He filed that information away. He was not going to use any nefarious means to win Miss Pratt over, but perhaps he could arrange for an appropriately timed gift ...

"It looks like we are all assembled! Please join us – for those of you not familiar with the castle it can be a bit disorienting." Henry winked and offered his arm to his wife.

"Luckily you have me at your side. I grew up in these halls," Erica said to Arie with a grin. "Though I must keep these two firmly in hand." She sent reproving glances down at her two children, young girls whose hands she held on either side of her.

"That is the second time someone has implied that the castle is ... haunted?"

"Haunted? Oh no, I – May! Come back here right now! Leave your cousin alone!" Erica shot an apologetic glance over her shoulder as

she hurried away to run down her younger daughter, who was trying to grab at her elder cousin's swinging braids.

A few paces behind, Lee began to step forward to fill the gap at Arie's side when Drake materialized suddenly. Arie smiled at him and when he offered his arm, she accepted it. Lee's gut lurched.

"Have you been to the chapel at Carcliffe Castle yet, Miss Pratt?" As Drake spoke, he inclined his head towards Arie as if he could not wait to hear what she had to say. His long dark hair fell forward over his forehead, partially obscuring his left eye and affecting that same devilishly handsome look he'd worn the night before.

"I have not, Mr. Thornton. I did a bit of exploring when I arrived yesterday morning, but since then Lady Clydon has kept me well occupied."

"I have heard that the marchioness has planned a most impressive feast for this evening. I hope you will be seated at my side." Drake's voice was deep and resonant and as he spoke his strong jawline highlighted his cheekbones and bone structure. Arie could objectively admit that he was a very handsome man. But she was unsurprised to find that her stomach did not leap, her heart did not race, her breath did not catch. She had encountered many handsome men during her seasons with the *ton*, but she had yet to feel that rush of emotion she'd had described to her by countless friends.

Well, that was not entirely true. She had not felt something like it until last night, in the presence of Viscount Bayfield.

Pushing aside that uncomfortable thought, Arie forced her attention back to Drake. "I read that the chapel here at Carcliffe Castle has an excellent collection of tapestries. I am quite interested to see them."

"You must read a lot to come across something as mundane as church tapestries."

Arie was not sure if that was a negative or positive commentary on her reading habits. "I do, yes. I find that balls and soirees do not hold the same fascination as they did when I was younger."

"A woman as beautiful as you, Miss Pratt? You must have no shortage of dance partners." There was the return of the overzealous compliments.

"I have more than I want or need," she said frankly. Drake looked a bit surprised by her forthrightness, which Arie enjoyed. Shocking people was always fun. Thankfully, they'd arrived at the chapel. Arie dislodged her arm.

"Won't you sit with me for the services?" Drake brushed aside his long hair as he spoke, drawing the attention back to his own handsome features. Arie almost rolled her eyes.

"I have promised to sit with Lady Erica and her daughters. Perhaps

another day.” Arie moved off in the direction of Henry’s sister, although she had promised nothing of the sort. She saw Drake making calculations behind those dashing dark eyes – probably trying to deduce if she was the sort of woman who attended church services daily and debating whether or not it was worth his time to pursue such a woman.

Arie settled into the pew next to Erica’s elder daughter, April.

The tow-headed little girl looked her up and down and then declared: “Red is my favorite color.”

“Is it indeed?” Arie felt her shoulders start to shake with mirth but she held it back as best she could, knowing the seriousness of such conversations to children.

“Yes. Mama will not let me wear it. She says it is not *appropriate*.” The little girl infused the last word with a laudable amount of derision.

Arie nodded sympathetically. “She is quite right. Young ladies are supposed to wear pale colors: pastels and whites.”

“Then why are you wearing red?”

“Because I am neither a young lady nor a very appropriate one.” Arie grinned at the look on the girl’s face – something between astonishment and awe.

“But you are quite beautiful.”

Arie blushed at the child’s unvarnished honesty – so much more compelling than the honeyed words of the debonair Mr. Thornton.

“Don’t you think she is beautiful?” The girl leaned forward so she could see Lee, who had sat down on the other side of Arie.

Lee cleared his throat. Arie leaned back in the pew so that he could join their conversation. There was a little half-smile on his face and his dark eyebrows were crinkled over his bright blue eyes.

“Yes, I do. Very beautiful,” Lee said without pause.

That. Her stomach had *never* done that before. Arie gripped the bench of the pew hard.

Young April looked satisfied by that answer. The service was starting and they all turned to face the front where the vicar was standing. Although Arie’s eyes were trained forward, she was startlingly aware of the man sitting next to her.

Beside her, Lee could have been on another planet for the amount of the Christmas service that he heard. He would have to slip April a sweet later; he had not put her up to the task, but she’d set him up brilliantly. He’d gotten up the nerve to come sit down beside Arie, planning on striking up a conversation. But the precocious little girl had done much better than he could have on his own.

As the service wound down, Lee realized he would lose his opening if he was not ready. In just a moment, the service would end and he

would have Miss Pratt to himself without the interference of the odious Mr. Thornton. The final prayer had been said, the attendees were standing up ... Lee scanned frantically, trying to find something – holiday floral arrangements, the stained-glass windows, tapestries ... tapestries! *Tapestries*?

“Miss Pratt, would you be interested in accompanying me to take a closer look at the chapel’s tapestries?”

She gave him a very strange look and Lee knew he’d sounded ridiculous. *Tapestries*. What woman wanted to talk about tapestries?

“Yes, actually, I would,” Arie said slowly. Had Lord Bayfield overheard her conversation with Drake? It could not be ... he’d been a few yards behind them as they’d walked to the chapel. But this could not possibly be a coincidence.

She accepted his proffered arm and walked with him around the pews. Three ornately woven tapestries hung on either side of the central aisle, each depicting a different religious scene. As they walked closer, Arie realized that the one in front of them did not appear biblical at all – it depicted a lone bird in a pear tree with sunbeams radiating outward.

“The chapel here at Carcliffe Castle is known for its tapestries,” Lee said gruffly, his voice catching in his throat.

“Yes, I know,” Arie said, looking back and forth between the tapestry and Lee with a query in her eyes. “I read that they are so grand, the church has tried to move them several times to a more prominent location. But the Marquesses of Clydon and the vicar here have fought successfully to keep them at Carcliffe Castle.”

“They were commissioned for the chapel by the third Marquess of Clydon, I believe.”

Arie’s smile was growing. Lee knew far too much about this for it to have been a conversation predicated on a whim. “How do you know so much about Carcliffe Castle’s history, Lord Bayfield? Didn’t you say this was your first visit?”

“I like to read, Miss Pratt. I was recently gifted by my brother a volume about the Reformation and it mentioned the artifacts.”

There was that little flip again – her heart and stomach dancing in unison. She stared up at Lee in fascination. What were the odds that she’d stumbled upon a man with so many shared interests ... from across the chapel, she heard Madison’s peal of laughter. It was not a coincidence, Arie reminded herself. Madison was a notorious matchmaker.

She turned back to the tapestry. “I cannot figure this one out. All of the other scenes I recognize ...” she slowly rotated around to look at the other five tapestries. As she did, she released Lee’s arm so she could get a better view. Immediately she regretted it. He was warm

and solid. She enjoyed touching him. And to put her hand back now would be awkward.

Had she drawn away intentionally? Lee could not help but wonder. Despite her professed interests, most women of his acquaintance would find this conversation tediously dull. But she turned back around with a wistful expression on her face, her hand frozen in front of her – not clasped together, almost as if she was going to reach out and touch him again –

“Miss Pratt! You found your tapestries!”

The moment broken, Arie’s hands dropped in front of her and her expression went blank. Lee could have kicked Drake for interrupting them.

“Lord Bayfield and I were just discussing this particular example and wondering about it. It seems out of place.” Arie crossed her arms in front of her. Whereas a moment before she’d felt open and engaged, she somehow now felt the need to protect herself.

“It’s a partridge in a pear tree, is it not? Like the Christmas song? It must be part of the marchioness’ holiday décor,” Drake said dismissively, clearly not the least bit interested in actually discussed tapestries now that he had regained Miss Pratt’s attention.

Arie quirked her head to the side contemplatively. “I suppose you’re right,” she said.

“Not exactly,” Lee interjected, a self-satisfied smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “The partridge in the pear tree is a veiled reference to Christ. The early Marquesses of Clydon were rumored to have secretly maintained their Catholic faith and even supposedly held masses in this very chapel well into the latter half of the last century.”

“That is fascinating!” Arie exclaimed, turning back to examine the tapestry earnestly. “Historical scandal, right here on the wall,” she murmured as she looked closer. Her arms had dropped and her stance was much more relaxed and natural now.

Drake scowled at Lee, now folding his arms across his chest. He opened his mouth to speak again and surely try to win back Miss Pratt’s attention, but Henry appeared at his shoulder. “Drake, my friend, Mr. Wilks and I have a few questions about your business in Calais.”

Unable to put him off without being immeasurably rude, Drake followed Henry back towards the door where Winston Wilks waited. The guests were beginning to filter out of the chapel in groups of two or three and make their way back towards the heart of the castle. Arie lingered before the tapestry and Lee stayed with her. They did not talk, but there was a comfortable camaraderie to it as they slowly moved around the perimeter of the chapel and observed the other

hangings.

Soon the only people left in the church were Susan and her mother, Mrs. Wilks, speaking with Leonora. Leonora was casting interested glances over at Lee and Arie that were difficult to miss – full of implication as they were. By contrast, Susan was looking daggers at Arie. At one point she even made like she was going to go interrupt them, only to be outmaneuvered by Leonora who asked her a direct question about her upcoming presentation at the royal court.

Out of the corner of his eye, Lee saw the other group start to move towards the door of the chapel. It would not be proper to remain here alone with Miss Pratt. He felt a jolt of disappointment.

Arie was also keenly aware of their surroundings. She was not as impressed by the notions of propriety. Why shouldn't she be allowed to have a conversation about tapestries, of all mundane things? She and Lee could hardly get into any of *that* kind of trouble in a church!

However, Lee was. "I believe Lady Clydon has prepared a feast for breakfast. Shall we go?" He asked, his hands folded politely behind his back.

"Afraid to be alone with me, Lord Bayfield?" She asked cheekily even though she did accept his invitation and started moving out into the corridor. The small group of women was perhaps a yard or two ahead of them.

Lee flushed and Arie's smile widened. Which then made his flush deepen. "Not afraid, Miss Pratt. But I would never want to put you in an uncomfortable situation." He glanced over at her as they walked side by side, her hands folded neatly in front of her just as his were clasped behind his back. They were the picture of propriety. And all Lee wanted to do was wrap her in his arms and kiss those plump pink lips.

They'd spent the better part of a half-hour discussing tapestries and he'd hung on her every word. Any woman who could inspire his mind and body so profoundly was one worth keeping.

"I think you underestimate me," she said with a smirk. "I am quite hardy." They were falling behind the other group, who seemed more interested in getting to Madison's sumptuous breakfast than in talking. But neither Arie nor Lee noticed. They were far too focused.

"You are quite ..." Lee searched for the words. "Let me say that I hope you never truly think I've underestimated you. For I hold you in the highest possible esteem."

Arie paused, her lips parting slightly as her breath rushed in. She'd heard variations on such sweet nothings before – so many times. But when the words came from Lee's mouth ... they seemed so genuine. There was no artifice with him and it was completely disarming.

Lee slowed to a stop alongside Arie. He watched her closely,

realizing how sappy, sentimental, and even foolish he must appear. But Arie seemed legitimately bowled over by the compliment.

“We’ve only just met,” Arie said softly. The only light in the corridor came from evenly placed candle sconces that had not been updated to gas lamps. As they stood there, the lights seemed to dim – several candles even blew out entirely, leaving the two on either side of the wall behind her illuminated and casting a golden glow all around them.

Lee could not account for his actions or thoughts, but it seemed like the walls themselves were pushing them closer together. He took a step closer to her as the space seemed to shrink. There was a sudden draft of cold and Arie shivered. Lee reached out without thinking to pull her shawl back up over her shoulders from where it had fallen around her elbows. His thumbs drew tingling lines up her arms as he drew the fabric upward and Arie shivered again, though this time not from the cold.

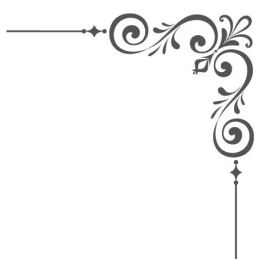
The room seemed to be pushing in on her. Had she been standing this close to the wall of the corridor this entire time? With her heart in her throat, compelled by some strange force she could not explain, Arie stepped towards him. Lee’s fingers lingered on the tops of her shoulders where he’d replaced her shawl for just a moment longer than was appropriate and he lowered his head.

He was going to kiss her, she realized a fraction of a second before his lips –

“We thought we’d lost you two! Everyone else is ready to go through to breakfast!” Leonora exclaimed, coming around the corner. All at once, the room seemed to fill with air and the candles flickered back to life, lighting the corridor brightly.

Leonora looked between the two of them with an odd expression on her face. Arie tightened her shawl around her shoulders. Lee cleared his throat. “Yes, we are coming right along,” he said gruffly.

Arie said nothing but nodded and strode forward ahead of Lee, coming to walk the rest of the way beside Leonora. She may have boasted that she was not easily rattled, but the last minute of her life had left her decidedly shaken.



Chapter 5

Lee sipped on his brandy while he quietly observed the chaos around him. Meera and Leonora were engaged in a long-lasting game of chess, each of their husbands standing at their shoulders to root on their respective wives in the sister-to-sister battle.

Madison sat on the floor between the two sofas playing with her young daughter Nora, a cherubic one-and-a-half-year-old who already showed promise of replicating her mother's beauty. The older children – three girls and one little boy, the children of Henry's sisters – were also gathered around playing with the baby while their mothers sat on the sofa looking on and chatting. Kelly, the Countess of Willingham, was talking to Susan – *bless her heart for keeping the girl off of him for a few moments.*

Drake had been pulled into a conversation with Henry, Theo, Mr. Wilks, and Henry's brother-in-law Thomas, though Lee could see him sending speculative glances Arie's way. Arie sat on the outer edge of the group of mothers and children with an embroidery hoop in her lap. She was working away diligently, occasionally offering a comment or pausing to smile at the children's antics.

All in all, it was a picturesque Christmas scene – the roaring fire, the boughs of greenery, the familial atmosphere. But just like Arie, Lee sat on the outskirts of it. Not a husband, not a father – valued but also a little less ... whole. He wondered if Arie felt it too. She looked perfectly content ...

As he watched, she paused as the children broke out into peals of laughter over something young Nora had done. Arie lowered her needle and rested it on top of the stretched white fabric in her hoop. She cocked her head to one side, showcasing the creamy pale skin of her neck. Her black shawl lay around her waist, superfluous before the warmth of the fire. She folded her graceful hands together, then unfolded them, then back together again. As she gazed at the children, her smile slowly faded to a wistful expression.

Lee almost felt embarrassed – like he had intruded on a private moment. Arie did not realize that anyone was watching her. And yet he could not draw his eyes away. Her lips softened until they were a relaxed line that tugged down at the corners in the slightest of frowns. Her gray eyes, lighter in the daylight, were almost black in the

evening light. He was filled with an overwhelming desire to wipe away that sad look on her face ... to do something to try and bring her joy.

Then as quickly as the look had appeared, she gave a little shake of her head and an expression of concentration returned. She picked up her tools and turned back to her work.

Lee was not the only one who had noticed Arie's expression. Madison pulled Nora close and smooched her chubby little cheek, then handed her up into her Aunt Helen's arms. Climbing to her feet, Madison drifted casually over to where Arie was sewing away.

"I have not picked up an embroidery hoop since I left my mother's house," Madison exclaimed, earning the desired laugh from her friend.

"I used to feel just that way. I swore that the moment I married, I would never do it again. But over time I've come to find it comforting. And surprisingly, I am quite good at it." Arie lifted the piece she was working on to show it to Madison.

Madison smiled indulgently. "Is that juniper?"

"Yes, for Junie," Arie nodded towards Helen and Thomas's ten-year-old daughter, who now had little Nora on her lap and was bouncing her energetically. "I thought I would make something for each of the children."

"Well, Junie is easy. I cannot wait to see what you dream up for August, April, and May."

"Such clever names," Arie said, only half-joking.

"It is not clever," Helen chimed in from the adjacent sofa. "It is annoying."

"It's been seven years; don't you think it is time to let it go?" Erica said, smiling devilishly at her elder sister.

Arie looked questioningly between them.

"I named August and Juniper, and then completely by happenstance we started calling Juniper by 'June' and 'Junie.' Then my sister thought it would be funny to name her daughter April," Helen explained, rolling her eyes.

"I just liked the name!" Erica cried in her own defense, though her eyes twinkled mischievously.

"And where did May come from, then?"

Erica grinned and shrugged.

Arie turned back to Madison. "You did not see fit to continue this noble tradition?"

"We certainly considered it," Madison teased. "But by the time Nora came along, all the good names were taken. So we called her after my sister Leonora instead."

"She's adorable," Arie said honestly. There was that wistful look again.

Erica and Helen turned their attention back to the children, but Madison settled down onto the arm of the sofa so she was next to Arie.

“How are you finding Carcliffe Castle, Arie?”

“It’s lovely! I cannot believe I have never accepted any of your invitations before now. Such a beautiful landscape, and the history of the place ... it’s so stunning and mysterious.”

“I remember when I first came here after Henry and I were married. I kept getting lost, taking wrong turns, and ending up in rooms I’d never seen before.”

Arie laughed. “It’s not just you. I stumbled upon Viscount Bayfield wandering the corridors yesterday quite lost.”

“Really? That’s interesting. It seems like the castle is up to its old tricks again.”

Arie paused with her needle halfway to the hoop. “What’s that?”

“Those are just the kind of tricks the castle used to play on me when I first arrived. Sometimes I still swear I can hear a voice carry from somewhere absurd, or a light is doused at the most peculiar moment.”

“Are you saying the castle is haunted?” Arie felt her pulse quicken at the notion.

Madison shook her head, her blonde locks glistening in the light as she chuckled. “No, no, nothing as gauche as that.” Her laugh subsided but a smile remained on her face. “But the castle ... let’s say it has a mind of its own. Its way of influencing events just so.”

Now Arie’s expression had turned cynical. “You are quite the pushy little matchmaker, Madison Warsham, but if you are telling me you now have an entire castle doing your bidding –”

Madison burst out into full-throated laughter. “I do not know whether to feel complimented or offended.”

“A bit of both.”

“I promise you, I do not pretend to have any modicum of control over the mysteries of Carcliffe Castle.”

“That is a relief,” Arie said cheekily.

Madison reached over and poked her in the side.

“The mystery of Carcliffe Castle?”

Both women turned at the little voice. Erica’s youngest daughter, May, had appeared at their feet.

“I know that one! Uncle Henry told it to me.” August, the eldest of the cousins at thirteen years old, puffed up his chest in self-importance. “There is a ghost who haunts the ruins of the old castle, up on the hill, and –”

“A ghost?” May’s eyes darted around nervously.

“Not a ghost, May.” Madison reached out a reassuring hand to her

niece.

“Yes! There is a ghost!” August came to his feet as he spoke loudly and insistently.

“What is going on?”

“Are we telling ghost stories?”

“August, you should not frighten your sister –”

“But Uncle Henry told me –”

“What’s all this?” By the time Henry appeared, they had the attention of all of the room’s occupants.

August seemed to cow a little, realizing that all eyes were on him. But he spoke up: “The castle is haunted.”

Henry laughed. Helen made an exasperated sound from the sofa while their sister Erica rolled her eyes. Arie watched the family dynamic interestedly. She’d never had a large family – just her, her younger sister, and their parents. No extended aunts or uncles or cousins. Over the tops of their heads, her eyes landed on Lee, who had come to stand beside the sofa with the rest of the guests. Their eyes met. Arie felt her head begin to swim – *had she drunk too much of Madison’s holiday punch?*

“It’s not haunted,” Madison said for the second time that night.

“But it certainly is not *not* haunted,” Erica put in.

“What does that mean?” Arie asked.

“You might as well just tell the story, Henry,” Helen sighed in resignation.

“Well, alright.” Henry feigned hesitation, but he was already settling into the heavily padded chair across from Arie’s. The children scooted up close to him on the floor while the adults settled in as well – moving over to make room for others to sit, perching on the arms of sofas and chaises, leaning against the mantle of the fireplace.

“The original tower castle was built sometime after the Norman invasion. The exact date wasn’t written down – not a lot of people were literate back then.”

“What does literate mean?” May interjected.

“Sit down and listen or we’ll be here all night,” her mother scolded.

“It means they did not read or write, dearie.” Henry grinned indulgently and tweaked his niece’s ear before continuing.

“The castle saw many a battle; they even mustered here before marching to fight at Bosworth. Of course, by then the new castle had been built. The new castle was built before the marquessate, by a Lord and Lady Booth in the early seventeenth century. They were favorites of the Virgin Queen and built this great palace with their bounty. But there were rumors. Rumors that Lady Booth was not happy in her marriage.”

The adults exchanged glances; even those who had not heard the story knew what was coming next. Meanwhile, the children were listening with rapt attention.

“She made a ... special friend,” Henry cocked an eyebrow at the adults. “A member of the Castle’s staff. A footman. They met clandestinely –”

“What does clandestinely –”

“Secretly.” Erica shushed her daughter.

“But they were almost discovered many times. Then something strange started to happen. Every time they were close to being found by Lord Booth, the castle seemed to help them. The candles would all blow out suddenly, giving them time to escape. Or voices would carry from many rooms away, distracting Lord Booth just when he was about to find Lady Booth and her footman.”

Arie’s gaze flew to Lee, who was looking at her with the same questioning look in his bright cerulean eyes. *The candles in the corridor on their way back from chapel ... could it have been ...*

“Now this went on for a long time. Lord and Lady Booth grew older. Whatever affection had existed between them melted away. Lord Booth knew his lady did not love him. He became cruel and cold. Lady Booth and her footman finally decided it was time to get away. They began to secret away funds for their escape – money, coins, jewelry – a treasure. And they hid it all in a place where no one would find it: the old castle.”

A shiver went through the group collectively. Few of them had ventured out over the snow-covered lawn to where the ruins of the old tower castle stood upon the hill. In the daylight, the half-standing rubble could be seen from the north-facing windows of Carcliffe Castle. At night, it was nothing more than a mysterious outline in the darkness.

“But before they could escape, the footman fell ill. Ignoring her husband’s ire, Lady Booth went to his bedside and tended him herself. She held his hand as her love slipped away. When he finally left, Lady Booth cried out. The castle carried her grief through the halls, echoing through corridors and rooms in every corner of Carcliffe Castle.

Lady Booth rose from her love’s bedside a changed woman. She walked up to the ruins of the old castle to retrieve her treasure, determined to leave her heartless husband once and for all. But the treasure was gone. She searched for hours to no avail. Had her husband discovered it? Or some other wanderer on the ruins?”

Henry looked between the wide-eyed faces of the children with a knowing smile. He too had sat on the hearthrug and heard his grandfather and father tell the legend of Carcliffe Castle.

“For all we know, the treasure remains in the ruins still. Hidden,

waiting, for two true lovers to find it and make their escape.”

“Ah yes, I remember my father telling me this tale many years ago,” Drake interjected. “Surely if the treasure had been found, you would have heard tell?”

Henry nodded in acknowledgement. “I spent many an afternoon up on the ruins with my mates hunting for the treasure. But so far as we know, no one has ever found it.” Henry winked at his nieces and nephew.

“I will find it! I will find the treasure!” April jumped to her feet and started toward the door of the library, ready to begin her search immediately.

Her elder cousin August rolled his eyes. “You need a true love to find the treasure. Didn’t you hear Uncle Henry?”

“Hmph.” April stamped her foot, a frown on her pert little face.

Erica had gotten to her feet and moved to console her daughter.

“A true love, how romantic,” a voice said quietly at Arie’s ear. Shivering, she turned to find that Drake had appeared at her shoulder.

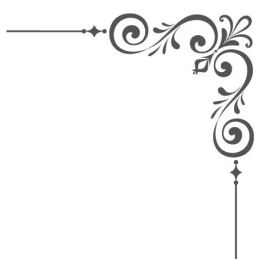
“A bit nonsensical,” Arie disagreed, picking back up her embroidery.

“Surely you believe in true love, Miss Pratt.”

“I cannot say that I do.” Though as she said the words, her eyes were inexplicably drawn across the room to the upright, dark-haired, blue-eyed gentleman now in conversation with the lord and lady of the house.



*On the second day of Christmas my true love sent to me
Two turtle doves ...*



Chapter 6

December 26th, 1815

Arie was wearing her second-favorite gown. She'd reached for her absolute favorite only to find a tiny snag in the embroidery at the neckline. Normally she would have worn it anyway, but it was her favorite, after all. She could not risk the snag getting worse and the dress needing more extensive mending. Sighing, she consigned the lovely gown to the hands of Madison's capable maid and instead settled for her second-favorite outfit.

She tried very hard *not* to think too deeply about just why she felt compelled to select her favorite clothing items on an otherwise unremarkable day.

She looked stunning and she knew it. The dress was made of thick dove gray velvet that fell in heavy plumes from the empire waist. While the gown had long sleeves well suited for a cold winter's day it did boast a rather daring neckline. As she stood before the mirror Arie toyed with the notion of going below stairs exactly as she appeared, with the swell of her breasts clearly visible. She watched as her face tinged pink at the notion. Instead, she tucked a simple chemisette into the neckline.

She centered a black onyx and diamond broach between her breasts – it had been a gift from her father on her twenty-first birthday to match her growing collection of gray ball gowns and day dresses. Gray was something of a signature color for her. Most women only wore it when they were in the various stages of coming out of mourning. Arie wore it because it matched her eyes.

The effect was very striking – there were rarely two women in the room both wearing the color.

Except for today. When Arie stepped into the morning room she immediately noticed the young woman seated between her mother and Kelly on the sofa. Wearing the exact same shade of dove gray as Arie.

The look that Susan gave her was as cold as the frozen-over pond they'd all ridden past on the long drive to Carcliffe Castle. Arie fought the urge to roll her eyes. Instead, she met Miss Wilks' gaze, gave her a serene smile, and then walked over to help herself to some breakfast.

"Good morning, Arie. My, you look lovely," Madison

complimented, pouring a cup of tea and handing it to her friend. "It looks like they've forgotten your honey, I'm afraid. I can go down to the kitchen and fetch some –"

"That is quite alright." Arie shook her head and took the steaming tea.

"We've let off most of the staff today to go visit with their families," Madison explained, gesturing towards the table laid out with various cold offerings. "We have a kitchen maid and a footman who have chosen to stay behind and bring up the food that Cook made. So we shan't starve. But we will be quite informal today."

"It looks lovely," Arie assured her, making herself up a plate with a scone and its accouterments and a boiled egg. She took her little plate over to the window and settled in with a nice view of the castle's snowy gardens. Lady Willingham drifted over a few minutes later.

"I don't mean to disturb your breakfast, I just need some ..." she glanced over her shoulder towards the spot she'd just abandoned next to Susan and Mrs. Wilks, "... quiet."

Arie felt a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "By all means." She nodded to the open seat adjacent to her. "I apologize for having lost track of all the introductions. Remind me how you know the marquess and marchioness?"

"Theo and Henry have been friends for a very long time. Madison befriended me when I first came to London for our wedding." The woman was about the same age as Arie, perhaps a year or two younger. She was petite, dressed in a green muslin day dress that matched the ribbon wound through her dark brown hair.

"She has a habit of doing that. She befriended me during our debut season." Arie smiled fondly at the memory.

"You've known her for a long time then, Miss Pratt?"

"Arie, if you would. I no longer compete with my sister for the title of Miss Pratt, but it still is overly formal for a holiday celebration."

"Arie – that's very pretty. Is it a nickname?"

"Yes. My mother had the audacity to name me Harriet."

Lady Willingham laughed. "How dare she! Arie will do just fine. You must call me Kelly."

"I would be most happy to do so." As the two women spoke, both Drake Thornton and Lord Bayfield entered the morning room. Arie continued to speak to the sweet and kind countess, but she kept one eye on the two new arrivals. Sure enough, Mr. Thornton approached them within just a few moments.

"Lady Willingham, Miss Pratt, you are the picture of a quintessential English country morning," he complimented very suavely, bowing low in front of them.

Kelly looked unimpressed. Arie thought she saw her new friend

exchange a glance with her husband across the room. The earl was in conversation with Henry and Susan's father, Mr. Wilks, but his gaze followed Mr. Thornton over to his wife.

"Thank you, Mr. Thornton," Kelly said promptly. "There is still plenty of delicious fare on offer." Kelly nodded back towards the table of refreshments.

Kelly might be quiet but she was crafty, Arie thought to herself. The other woman clearly did not think much of Mr. Thornton and was quite aptly attempting to dispatch him from their company.

"You are most kind, Lady Willingham. But I find myself with different appetites this morning." He looked directly at Arie as he spoke.

Arie felt a flutter of something in her stomach ... not dissimilar to how she felt when she was with Lord Bayfield. But also, not quite the same. Drake made her nervous and perhaps a tiny bit ... wary. She put that thought aside. It was not charitable. She hardly knew the man. And what did she possibly have to be wary of? An overzealous suitor? Arie had been dealing with those for years.

"Kelly, would you settle a disagreement between myself and Henry?" Theodore arrived just a second behind Drake. He offered his hand to his wife who took it eagerly, though she had the good grace to shoot an apologetic look Arie's way.

"I suppose I must," – though there was no regret in her voice as she followed her husband across the room, leaving Arie and Drake alone.

Drake did not await an invitation; he took the seat Kelly had just vacated and flashed that wide smile at Arie.

"I have you all to myself now."

Arie picked up her scone and took a large bite without bothering to spread it with any clotted cream. Drake looked at her expectantly, waiting for a response. Arie just smiled, pointed to her very full mouth, and kept chewing. Fortunately – or unfortunately – a man like Drake had no problem filling the empty space in a conversation.

"I feel quite remiss that I have not asked about your family, Miss Pratt. Lady Clydon mentioned you have just one sister?"

Arie nodded and wished she had taken a bigger bite as she drew out chewing as long as was reasonably possible.

"No brothers, then?"

"No. Just me and Imelda. Though she is married now, with children of her own."

Drake made a show of looking concerned. "Your poor father must worry for you. What will happen to the viscountcy when he passes on?"

What an unusual question. She had not even brought up her father,

and now Mr. Thornton was asking about what would happen in the event of her father's death? A new thought entered Arie's mind. Perhaps she'd been too quick to label Drake as a simple rake. Perhaps he was something much more dangerous: *a fortune hunter*.

A man in want of a fortune ... well, they were not known for their trustworthiness.

"I hate to think of such things. I am very close to my father," Arie said carefully.

Drake paused for just a moment, temporarily caught off guard by her demurring. But then he blathered on.

"My father always spoke of Carcliffe Castle so fondly. He used to tell me such stories. He visited many times throughout his life. I am so pleased to finally have the opportunity to explore it for myself. It is an intriguing place, is it not?"

"Indeed."

"I have not yet experienced its ... anomalies myself. Have you, Miss Pratt?"

She'd been an inch short of shoving the boiled egg into her mouth. She smiled tightly and lowered it by a few inches. "A few odd things. But nothing that cannot be explained away." With that, she took a hearty bite of the egg.

Unfortunately, her admission had piqued Drake's interest. His dark eyebrows rose so high they disappeared beneath the over-long locks that fell across his forehead.

"Do tell me!" He encouraged, looking at her eagerly. He leaned forward, his elbow resting on the arm of his chair and his face uncomfortably close to hers.

As she finished chewing, Arie resigned herself. "A flickering candle here, a carrying voice there. Nothing remarkable, I assure you." She reached for her tea and nearly scalded her tongue it was still so hot.

"It is just as Henry said! You must believe in the legend, then? Have you thought about looking for the treasure?" Drake watched her closely.

Arie laughed. "No, Mr. Thornton. I believe it is a story for children. An entertaining one at that. But still, a story and nothing more."

Drake cocked his head to one side and then the other. He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands together so that the fingertips matched with their opposites in a little tent. "Surely you hope to one day have children of your own, Miss Pratt?"

It was a terrible segue. And a deeply personal question, though Arie had firsthand experience that men and women alike seemed to think that single women were not entitled to any type of privacy.

"I am not married," Arie said instead. In truth, she did want children. It was perhaps the part of her spinsterhood that bothered her

most. But that was not something she was going to discuss here and now, with Drake Thornton, who was becoming more odious by the moment.

“Not yet,” he winked, full of implication.

Arie stood up. This was getting out of control quickly. “Nor do I think that I shall be anytime soon, Mr. Thornton. Now if you will excuse me, I believe that Viscount Bayfield has just beckoned.”

In truth, Viscount Bayfield was talking with Susan and Henry’s elder sisters, Erica and Helen. *Good, they both needed saving.*

“Good morning! I hope everyone rested well!” She said merrily without bothering to glean the direction of the conversation first. Henry’s sisters were much too well-mannered to protest.

“I always do sleep so well here at Carcliffe Castle,” Erica said accommodatingly.

“Speak for yourself,” Helen disagreed. “I keep badgering Henry to replace the bed in my room. I think it is the same one that was here when I was a girl.”

“That’s right – you both grew up at Carcliffe Castle, did you not?” As she waited for a response, Arie shot a look at Lee over the rim of her teacup. He stood beside Susan, who kept swinging her arm casually. She looked like she was trying to ‘accidentally’ brush up against him. Arie was embarrassed for the poor girl – Lee could not have been more ambivalent, eyes fixed on the speaker.

“I used to be able to say that I’d lived here longer than Henry. But alas, I think he’s finally outlasted me.” Helen looked affectionately at her brother across the room. He was the youngest of the siblings by a wide margin.

As Helen spoke, Arie thought perhaps she ought to dangle her hand down and see if it brushed with Lee’s ... *that was preposterous!* She shook herself hard and just for good measure, wrapped both of her hands around the teacup she was holding to avoid temptation.

“How are your accommodations, Lord Bayfield?” Arie heard herself say.

“Extravagant, to say the least. I am in the Alderwood suite.”

Helen and Erica let out twin sounds of appreciation and approval. “I used to go in there and pretend to be a visiting princess,” Erica admitted.

“It is very lavish. Much more than I need just for myself.” Lee had been thrilled when Arie appeared. She had not looked particularly happy as she crossed the room from her conversation with Drake. But now she was smiling again.

“I should love to see it sometime!” Susan piped in, risking a hand on Lee’s arm.

Lee looked down at her fingers on the arm of his coat as if he could

not quite make sense of the sight. “That would be wholly inappropriate, I am afraid. You will have to content yourself with descriptions, Miss Wilks.” He tried to shift his body so her hand would drop away, but Susan held on most persistently.

Discomfited, Lee turned back to the conversation.

“Are the drapes still that lovely silver damask?” Erica asked, her eyes a little glazed over as she envisioned the room she’d frequented in her childhood.

“Yes, though I don’t know that I would call them silver. They are grayer. Quite like your gown, Miss Pratt.”

“A gown that looks like drapery, just what every woman wants to hear,” Arie teased.

“No, no,” Lee hurried to respond, but seeing the cheeky smile on Arie’s face he relaxed. “I assure you, your gown is not even comparable. The color on you ... is nothing short of magnificent.”

Arie might have blushed; she did not know. She was much too busy getting trapped in those alluring blue eyes.

A mewl like a wounded cat penetrated her haze. Arie’s eyes fell on Susan, whose lips were pouted out so far Arie could almost have set her teacup on the ledge they made. The chit was still clinging to Lee’s arm uninvited.

“I am used to seeing widows wearing gray. But then, you’ve never been married, have you, Miss Pratt?”

Helen, Erica, and Lee’s eyes all widened at the impertinent comment. Arie pursed her lips, though to a much more elegant effect.

“Indeed, I have not, Miss Wilks. And why are you wearing gray today? Already mourning your soon-to-be soiled reputation?”

Susan flushed a deep red. The color climbed her cheeks and then flooded down over her neck and the triangle of her chest revealed by her modest frock. Her eyes seemed to grow in size, magnified by the angry tears. She tore her hand from Lee’s arm and stormed from the room. The doors had been wide open, but she flew through them so quickly one snapped back and slammed shut dramatically.

The eyes of the entire guest list of the marquess and marchioness’ house party – save the one who had just stormed out – went in unison from the slammed door back to the little triad who remained.

Arie sighed. She’d been too harsh and she knew it. The girl needed to be put in her place, that much was certain. But it was the job of her mother or father to do it. And if they seemed oblivious, Madison ought to have been the one to speak with them.

She took a fortifying sip of her tea. *Lord, give me strength*, she prayed as she set the teacup on the tray where the guests were putting their used dishes to accommodate the pared-down staff and headed out the door to apologize to Susan.

Stepping into the entry hall of the Castle, she looked around. Carcliffe Castle was enormous; there were so many places that Susan could have gone to cry privately. Arie decided she would start upstairs in the bed chambers. Her foot was on the first stair when she heard the carrying sound of sobs. She paused, waiting. There it was again – coming not from upstairs but from the room opposite to the morning room where the other guests breakfasted.

It was a room that Arie had not entered before. Dark walnut wood paneling covered the walls and there were clusters of chairs huddled throughout the room. A rich red Turkish carpet covered the stone floor. Perhaps a smoking room? Or a card room? Arie followed the sound of the sobs, which seemed to be coming from the other end of the room where a door was ajar.

It opened into a small go-between room with doors on either end. The door ahead was closed. Arie had to pause a few feet into the room to listen for Susan again. *Wait, had she stopped crying?* There was no more sound to follow.

Arie hesitated – perhaps she had been hearing something else all along and Susan really was upstairs. She decided to turn around and go back –

“My goodness!”

“Pardon me –”

“What are you doing here?” Arie said sharply, taken aback by Viscount Bayfield’s sudden appearance.

“I wanted to see if you were alright. You left so suddenly, I thought perhaps Miss Wilks’ comments had upset you.” Looking her over, Lee tried to ascertain given their limited acquaintance if anything was amiss.

“I am fine. I came after Susan to apologize.” Arie smoothed her dress – though it did not need smoothing – just to give her hands something to do.

Lee raised his dark eyebrows. *How could someone look handsome even when skeptical?* Arie asked herself.

“That is very magnanimous of you,” Lee observed.

“Well, as she so kindly pointed out, I am practically a spinster. I ought to be better behaved than a debutante.”

“I think your chagrin is understandable,” Lee said kindly. Arie smiled nervously. They were quite alone, if only for a moment. The door connecting to the card or smoking room had closed behind Lee when he came through.

Lee cleared his throat – *he must be as nervous as she was*. For some reason that charmed and warmed Arie.

Arie swallowed hard and tried to push down her heart, which seemed to be in her throat. “I ought to go find Susan.”

“Yes, of course.” Lee stepped back and reached for the door behind him. He put his hand on the handle, then stopped. He turned around with a strange look on his face. “The door is locked.”

“You must be jesting.”

“I wish that I were.”

Arie pushed past him, determinedly ignoring the solid heat of his body as it grazed against hers. She shook the door handle firmly. No give. She shook it more aggressively, letting out a little cry of frustration. She tried the door on the opposite end, but she seemed to already know the answer: also locked.

“This is no use,” she huffed, pushing back a strand of dark blonde hair that had fallen forward. “Ought we to call out? Someone might hear us as they finish breakfast.”

Lee looked pessimistic. “And tell them what, exactly? That I followed you into an empty room, we became locked inside, and nothing untoward happened?”

Her cheeks reddened. “Nothing untoward is going to happen,” she said firmly. “If this is one of Madison’s little tricks ...” She raised a hand to her temple and massaged it.

“You have a lot of faith in Madison’s abilities.” Lee could not help but chuckle.

“Have you met the woman? She’s of a singular mind. And she seems to have decided that it’s time I am married.” As much as she hated to admit it, Lee was right. They could not call for help or she would certainly be compromised. Madison would, of course, be overjoyed. They would have to devise a way out of the little trick room on their own.

“This particular series of events seems to be of a more ... mystical nature,” Lee observed, looking around the small room in which they were now trapped.

It was no more than a closet – a passageway between two larger rooms that just happened to have doors on either end. Cupboards lined the walls on one side and there was a plain papered wall with a chair rail on the other. It was a storage or staging area of some kind.

Arie had given up trying the doors and now stood with her arms crossed over her chest and an irritated look on her lovely face. “I don’t believe in fairytales.”

“I thought it was more of a ghost story.”

“I don’t believe in those either.”

“And yet here we are, together again.”

“Are you implying the castle has something to do with our current predicament?”

“I am just saying these last two days have been exceedingly awkward. And I cannot seem to find any other explanation.” Lee

looked around the room with an assessing eye. "Why did you come this way to begin with?"

"I heard Susan crying." Arie sighed doubtfully. "I thought I heard Susan crying."

"The castle playing tricks, perhaps?"

Arie shook her head dismissively. "A stray wind whistling through the halls, I am sure."

"If you say so." Lee started opening the cupboards. In the first, there were tall taper candles made of beeswax and a collection of heavy silver candlesticks that must be worth a small fortune. He held one up. "Bang on the door until it gives way?" He suggested.

Arie rolled her eyes, but the corner of her mouth wavered. Lee replaced the candlestick and opened the next cupboard. There were carefully folded linens, tablecloths, napkins, and so on arranged on the first shelf. On the lower shelf were cleaning rags, also neatly folded but clearly used for something rougher. Perhaps cleaning and polishing the silver candlesticks.

"We could build quite a fort."

"It would be the envy of the children, I'm sure." Arie was smiling now. A small but true curving of her red-wine colored lips. Lee became suddenly very aware of how alone they were. He *could* kiss her now. No one would know; they were utterly alone. Of course, if she would allow it. But something about the slightly heavy set of her lids over her dark eyes and that small smile made him think she might.

That thought on his mind, Lee moved to the third and final cabinet. This one was stocked with wine glasses, champagne glasses, and the most likely tool.

"A corkscrew!" Arie looked suitably impressed. "Do you think you could use that to pick the lock?"

Lee looked at it dubiously. "I don't have much experience with that kind of thing. Much more of my brother's type of activity."

Arie held out her hand. Lee laid the corkscrew in her palm. He dragged his fingers over the delicate skin in what could have been an innocent and incidental touch. He could not help himself. He slowly raised his eyes to her face, expecting to find reproach. Instead, she was staring back at him with those intense gray eyes, the exact shade of her dove gray dress. The color of wet stone after heavy rain. He saw her swallow hard, her delicate throat moving. His heart surged in recognition – she was as affected as he was. But then she closed her fingers over the corkscrew and turned away, breaking the moment.

"I have never tried to pick a lock before either," Arie admitted as she tentatively inserted the end of the metal instrument into the small hole below the door handle. "But we must try something."

Lee watched in silence as she fiddled with the lock, moving the corkscrew up and then down again, side to side, jiggling the handle to try and help it along. All to no effect.

“Here, let me try.” Lee reached for the corkscrew, his hand covering hers as he tried to move the item in a way she had not yet tried.

He was so close. *Lord, he smelled good.* Up close, she could see every individual hair at his temple. He wore his hair close-cropped, a stark contrast to the longer style favored by most men she knew.

She wondered how it would feel to touch. Without thinking, Arie reached out –

Click.

The lock gave way and the door swung open instantly.

Arie and Lee both stumbled forward into the dark-paneled game room. The corkscrew was still in Arie’s hand.

“Thank you for your help,” she said, holding it up.

“It was a joint effort.” Lee’s voice came out gruffly. How could he be so deeply affected by such a small touch, a short interaction?

“I ought to go see about finding Susan.”

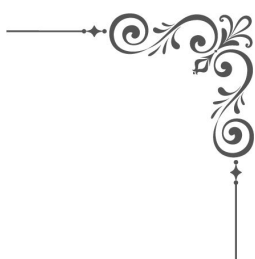
“Of course. I will put that back.” He accepted the corkscrew from her hand, steeling himself to prepare for her touch. It was featherlight and sent shivers up his arm. Apparently, there was no preparing himself for the feelings Miss Pratt inspired.

“Good day, Lord Bayfield.”

“And to you, Miss Pratt.”



*On the third day of Christmas my true love sent to me
Three French hens ...*



Chapter 7

December 27th, 1815

For almost a decade, since assuming the viscountcy from his father, Lee had started his mornings with a brisk walk. When he first began it had been a way of coping with the enormity of his new responsibilities. He would walk from end to end of the estate, corner to corner, fully appreciating the nuance of every copse of trees and rolling hill. As he got older, it was a time to think through troubles or complicated issues without interruption. Nary a servant nor guest had ever gotten up the gumption to follow him out into the cold and dewy English morn.

Mornings at Carcliffe Castle were particularly cold. Lee almost decided to stay ensconced in the warmth of his bed. It had snowed anew overnight and outside his window he could see the bright glow as the gray morning light reflected off the bright white ground. He had not been up to the ruins yet. Both prior mornings he had stuck mostly to the gardens and the area immediately surrounding the house. But ever since he'd heard Henry's mysterious tale, and he'd been caught alone with Arie not once but twice in questionable circumstances, he'd felt a calling to go and have a closer look at the ruins of the old tower castle for himself.

Newly motivated, Lee climbed from bed and started to dress. *Best wear an extra pair of stockings inside his boots*, he thought to himself. *Or two.*

SHE WOKE UP IN THE wee hours of the morning drenched with sweat. Vaguely remembering her dream ... *the touch of a hand on hers, a wall of solid warmth* ... the images faded and Arie drifted back to sleep ...

Light was streaming in from her parted curtains – bright white and intrusive enough to wake even the heaviest sleeper. But it wasn't what woke her. It was the draft of cold that sent her shivering and burrowing under her coverlet like an animal trying to hibernate. She peeked her head above the blankets to get a view of the fireplace. It was still banked, the embers glowing. *Then why was she so damnably cold?*

Determined to put on her wool dressing gown and then go back to sleep, Arie clambered out of bed. She drew the coverlet around her for warmth as she crossed to the armoire in the corner. She paused halfway across the floor, her eyes drawn to the window by a flash of light. A breeze had blown the curtains farther apart, letting in even more light.

A breeze – had she left the window ajar? She wandered closer, pushing aside the heavy curtain to get a look at the window. It was firmly closed. She gasped.

Fresh snow had fallen overnight, painting the hills surrounding Carcliffe Castle with a sparkling white glow. The dirty ruts of wagon wheels from the past few days had been completely covered up, leaving behind only pristine white. It was as if the entire landscape had been wiped clean.

The sun had risen behind a wall of gray-white clouds, amplifying the white of the snow. Framed perfectly in her window was the hill upon which stood the ruins of the old castle. The light was shining from behind them with an almost ethereal glow.

Arie glanced at the mantle clock. It was still early. The household would be abed. But not her. The majestic hills were calling her. And if she was going to be cold, she might as well get a view along with it.



THANK GOODNESS SHE'D had the good sense to layer on an extra pair of stockings underneath her thick winter boots. Even with the fur lining, she was grateful for every barrier between her toes and the layer of snow upon the ground. It was light and fresh, so with every step, she sank down several inches. By the time she reached the foot of the hill where the castle ruins stood, she was huffing heavily.

Most of the outer wall of the tower remained. It had fallen in places and there was a section of the foundation that had tumbled down – and the wall above with it – and was now nothing more a cascading pile of rubble on the hillside. Arie pulled her arms from their warm muff so they'd be free if she fell forward. Like most castles built in the same era, the old castle sat atop the highest hill for miles. And it had likely been fortified with earth at the time of building to make it taller still.

When she reached the top of the hill she paused for a moment to catch her breath. Hands on her hips, she turned back around and gazed back on the current Carcliffe Castle. There were lights in several of the windows. The guests were beginning to wake. By the time Arie returned from her walk, Madison and Henry's staff would have surely laid out a rich breakfast offering. She could almost taste the tea and honey in her mouth.

But for now, a different castle was beckoning. She tucked her hands back into her fur muff and started to carefully pick her way up the path. She entered the remains of the circular tower through a large arched doorway. The wooden door that would have secured the entrance had long since rotted away, leaving just the stone opening. It was a larger tower keep than others she'd seen. Most were simply circular stone towers with wooden staircases and levels built into the interior. This was more complex. There were inner and outer stone walls with a space of several feet between them, leaving space for various rooms in between. Arie paused and looked to either side. To her left, the inner wall had collapsed in, making whatever rooms were inside essentially impassible. To her right, the passage was dark and filled with spiderwebs, but it was accessible. *Maybe later*, she thought to herself.

She proceeded deeper inside – a relative term, as the wooden roof that had covered the keep had long since disappeared and she was beneath the cloudy gray sky as she stepped into the interior. There were still some remnants of the stairs along one of the walls. Arie ran her hand along a few of the more intact steps. It looked like stones had been laid into the actual walls to form some of the staircase. Brown dirt was visible underneath the overhangs of the stone stairs. But most of the inner circle of the old castle was covered with the same white snow that lay all over the grounds. A little tree poked up out of the snow several yards away near the opposite wall. Snow clung to the leaves of ivy, still green as their vines climbed the neglected walls. Some might consider it ghostly or desolate. But to Arie it was ... romantic. She sighed happily. Despite the cold licking at her toes, it was well worth the adventure.

There was a crunch of dirt behind her – the snow was far too soft to carry sound. Arie turned around just in time to see Lee emerge from a doorway she had not noticed before. It was partially obscured by a veil of ivy, tucked beneath the stone stairs.

“Lord Bayfield!” She cried, astonished. Her heart beat wildly in her chest. For once, not from attraction but from surprise at seeing him there.

“Miss Pratt.” Lee stepped further into the light, brushing off some snow that had fallen onto the sleeve of his heavy wooden greatcoat. “What are you doing out of doors so early?”

“I might ask the same of you. I am having a walk.”

“As am I. I just did not expect to see anyone else.”

“Women are just as entitled to a morning stroll as men.”

“Of course they are.” Lee tried very hard not to chuckle at her. He'd neither implied nor meant any such thing, but her dander was up. And she was even more beautiful because of it. “It is just that it is

– if you'll forgive my language – damnably cold.”

If he'd been trying to get Arie to laugh, he succeeded. “I did not think you capable of cursing, Lord Bayfield.”

Lee smirked. “I am capable. Quite proficient. But I usually leave that kind of thing to my brother, Christopher.”

“So you said yesterday. You've painted a wild picture of your younger brother.”

“He always was the wild one. Determined to strike out on his own and make his way in the world.”

“And what does that make you?” Arie asked, interested to hear his answer. She'd made several of her own assessments over the past few days.

“The steady one. The responsible one. The viscount.”

Arie cocked a golden-brown eyebrow. “Being a viscount does not require steadiness or responsibility. Trust me, I've met more than my share of irresponsible lords.”

“To me, it means everything,” Lee said simply.

Arie could feel her respect for him, already healthy and measurable, grow within her. And her attraction. There was no denying it. She was very attracted to Leland Bowden, Viscount Bayfield. More than she had ever been to another man of her acquaintance. But what was to be done about it?

That she was less sure of.

“Have you had enough of the ruins for the morning?” Lee asked.

Arie glanced around and shook her head. “I see you've already been to look at the inner rooms. I would like to see for myself.”

Lee glanced overhead at the rising light. The clouds had cleared somewhat and the sun was starting to break through. “It was rather dark, but we might be able to see more now.” He held out his hand. “Shall we?”

Despite the cold, Arie eagerly slid her hand from its cozy spot inside her fur muff and put it into his. He led her back through the opening from whence he came. Inside the inner room was indeed quite dark. The only light came from the bit of sky exposed between the inner and outer walls and that was yards and yards above their heads. The ground here was more protected, strewn with leaves and dirt rather than snow. The narrow passage opened into a more spacious room with a window cut into the inner wall, allowing in more light.

“What do you think this room was?” Arie wondered aloud. She disengaged her arm from Lee so she could explore the room more thoroughly.

“Who knows? Storage? A bedroom? A stable, or a small armory, maybe? It is lost to time,” Lee mused.

Arie sighed. "It's lovely. I like the mystery." She looked around the room one more time, conjuring up possibilities in her mind. Then a shiver of cold snaked through her. "I think it is time to go inside before my toes turn to ice."

Lee shivered himself. "I'm of the same mind," he said obligingly. He offered his arm again.

She smiled and stepped forward. Her boot slipped on a wet rock and she fell towards him. Lee was quick – he rushed forward and caught her against his chest, wrapping his arms around her tightly to keep her upright.

Arie grabbed onto Lee's coat, trying to right herself. She got her legs under her and started to straighten. Lee's hold loosened but he did not release her entirely, intending to keep her steady until she securely found her footing.

A gasp rent the air.

Lee froze; he had a clear view from where he stood to the stone doorway that opened to the main entryway to the tower. Arie had to turn to see.

Susan stood framed in the doorway, the bright morning light flooded around her. It darkened her countenance, but neither Lee nor Arie needed a close appraisal to read the young woman's aghast expression.

Arie regained herself first. "Miss Wilks, I can explain –"

But Susan did not wait to hear any explanations. She disappeared back out the archway.

Shaking herself free of Lee's steadying hands, Arie hurried after her. She stumbled once, still a bit shaken from her tumble, and had to grab the stone wall to keep from toppling over. By the time she was steady and emerging from the ruins onto the edge of the hill, Susan was well out of reach.

"We must get to her and explain. Are you well enough to walk?" Lee asked, looking her up and down.

"I am well enough to run." Arie lifted her skirts and took off down the hill, Lee fast at her heels.

Susan reached the house ahead of them. She opened the door and crossed the threshold as Arie and Lee reached the edge of the drive, leaving the door ajar behind her. They slowed to a walk as they gained the front stairs.

"She must have followed me outside," Lee opined, shaking his head.

"She's been obsessed with you since that first night." Arie's voice was grim. Lee held back the door and motioned Arie in, a gentleman even in moments of strife.

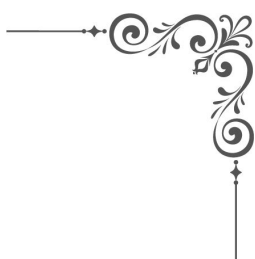
Susan was standing at the foot of the stairs.

“Miss Wilks, please allow us to explain ...” Arie’s voice trailed off as Susan stepped to the side to reveal her mother. If Arie had thought Mrs. Wilks dour-faced when she first saw her climb out of the carriage in front of Carcliffe Castle on Christmas eve, it was nothing to compare to the look on her face now.

“Mrs. Wilks, your daughter witnessed an unfortunate –”

“It is unfortunate that my dear maiden daughter, not even yet properly out in society, witnessed such a thing.”

The older woman’s words hung in the air with the weight of lead.



Chapter 8

“Perhaps we ought to step into the parlor and discuss this privately,” Lee suggested, motioning towards the aforementioned room.

“I do not think so, Lord Bayfield. I will not have my daughter discussing this any further. I have her reputation to protect.”

Lee opened his mouth to argue further, but Arie put her hand on his sleeve. She shook her head. “It’s done.”

Mrs. Wilks took Susan’s arm and started leading her up the stairs. Susan looked back at the couple, her face a wild mix of emotions. Neither Lee nor Arie saw it.

Lee motioned again towards the parlor. Arie nodded and went into the room, her boots heavy on the stone floor. Her mind was racing wildly. She was compromised.

Years. She had spent years avoiding this very thing – she had never followed a rake into a secluded room, she had never stolen a kiss on the terrace while others danced away. And yet it had all been for naught. She was in the home of her dearest friend. She’d let her guard down and now everything had changed.

“We will give Susan and Mrs. Wilks some time to calm down, and then I will approach them. Perhaps I can speak with Mr. Wilks. He seems a reasonable man ...”

Arie was shaking her head. “It will not matter. Susan will repeat what she saw – she’s a willful girl. We may be alright for a while, but then she will go to London for the Season and her mouth will open. Debutantes love to gossip and ruin each other. It is practically a sport.” Arie sank onto the sofa.

Lee watched her with a sinking feeling in his gut. There was only one way this would end now. He’d wanted Arie since the moment he saw her. But not like this. Somewhere in the back of his consciousness, he felt a little spark of joy. And he hated himself for it.

He gritted his teeth. No matter what he felt inside at that moment, he needed to do right by Arie. He slid off the simple gold band that he wore on the smallest finger of his left hand as he sank to his knee before her.

“Miss Harriet Pratt, will you consent to be my wife?”

Arie stared at the petite ring he held out to her. She’d imagined

this moment a thousand times in her life – how it would feel, what she would say. But all she felt was a penetrating numbness.

“Yes, of course,” she said quietly, holding out her hand so that Lee could slip the ring onto her finger.

Once again, they were interrupted by a gasp – though this one was laced with glee.

“Engaged?” Madison shrieked joyously from where she stood in the doorway, her young daughter Nora tucked cozily onto her hip.

Nora made a face at her mother’s loud sound, and then in typical toddler fashion repeated it herself by shrieking as loudly as she could. All three of the adults cringed. Madison found her daughter’s hand, pulled her thumb free of her pudgy little fist, and popped it into her mouth. While the little girl sucked industriously, Madison turned back to Arie and Lee.

“I am so happy for you! I just knew –”

“It is not like that, Madison,” Arie said sharply.

Madison’s smile slid off her face. She looked between the two of them, noting the grim expressions. “What happened?”

“We happened upon each other walking on the ruins this morning. Miss Pratt tripped, I caught her. It was perfectly innocent. However, Miss Wilks thinks that she saw ... something else.” Lee wanted to reach out and take Arie’s hand. He could see how unhappy she was. But though he might now be her fiancé, he did not feel that he had the right to such a casual touch.

“Surely we can reason with Susan ...” Madison trailed off as she heard the sound of voices in the entry hall.

Arie shook her head. “No, she’s told her mother, and by now, who knows who else.” Arie held up her hand and forced a smile onto her face, though it was clearly pained. “We are engaged. Congratulate me, won’t you?”

Madison sighed sympathetically. With the arm that was not holding a wiggling toddler, she reached out and grasped her friend’s hand. “Congratulations, my dear ones.”

“What are we congratulating?” Christopher asked boisterously as he entered the parlor with Meera on his arm. Quick behind him were Erica, Helen and her husband Thomas, and their coterie of children.

Fuck it. Lee reached for Arie’s hand and gripped it tightly in his own. They were to be married, after all.

Surprised by the sudden contact, Arie turned to look at him. As she had been so many times over the past few days, she was caught in that bright blue gaze. She did not know him well enough yet to read his expression or meaning, but she felt her chest begin to relax and a feeling of comforting warmth begin to spread through her.

Ever the attentive host, Madison seemed to read the expression on

their faces quite adeptly. She turned to face the stream of arriving guests. “Miss Pratt and Viscount Bayfield are to be married!” She announced merrily, a huge smile plastered to her face.

There was a chorus of congratulations. Just inside the doorway, Susan stood beside her mother. Tears were streaming down her cheeks, but the other guests were so swept up they paid her no notice. Unable to bear it any longer, she fled from the room for the second time in as many days – in such a rush she did not notice the tall, dark figure that stood just outside the foyer, arms crossed and a deep scowl upon his tanned face.



THE FEELING OF WARMTH in Arie’s stomach lasted exactly six hours.

“What do you mean, he has gone out? For a walk? A ride?”

“No, Miss. His valet packed an overnight bag for him and he rode out just before luncheon.”

Arie blinked. Then she blinked again. Maybe the next time, she would open her eyes and Lord Bayfield would be standing before her rather than Michaelson, the butler.

Alas, the scene remained unchanged. She reached one hand up and massaged her temple. “Did Viscount Bayfield give any indication when he would return?”

The butler cringed. “I am afraid not, Miss Pratt.”

Arie sighed as she turned away, shaking her head as she looked around the room as if somewhere here she could find the answers.

“Miss Pratt, would you like me to –”

“No. Whatever it is, no. I need a moment alone.”

The man gave her a sympathetic nod before departing. After an emotionally exhausting breakfast, Arie had retreated to her bed chamber. She’s spent the better part of the morning tossing paper into the fireplace simply for the pleasure of watching it burn. It was something she’d seen her father do on occasion when trying to think through a difficult problem. She’d never done it herself until that morning, but she had to admit that it was oddly satisfying. Especially when everything else felt out of her control.

After luncheon – Lee had been conspicuously absent – she’d taken to the turquoise blue sitting room she’d discovered on her first day at Carcliffe Castle. When a footman brought her tea, she requested that a message be delivered to Lord Bayfield asking him to meet her there.

They needed to discuss details since they were to be wed. She thought perhaps they should do it here at Carcliffe Castle. Their friends were already assembled. Her parents and sister were not here, obviously, but her mother would be so bowled over with delight that Arie thought she’d forgive her marrying without her present.

But Lee was nowhere to be found. He had departed with no indication of where he was going or when he would return.

Arie was baffled. Was he throwing her over? Had the proposal been entirely for show?

She dismissed those notions almost as quickly as they entered her head. There was no way she could have misjudged Lee so tremendously. Which left only logical or practical considerations. Why would he have left so abruptly and without telling her where he was going?

“There you are! I see you’ve found one of my favorite rooms in the castle.” Madison strode in with her daughter on her hip just as she had been this morning. She took the seat opposite Arie and shifted the toddler from hip to lap. “She’s been quite fussy today. I think she must have new teeth coming in. Her nanny is quite competent, but when she wants her Mama ...” Madison shrugged. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Of course not! This is her home, after all.” Arie smiled at Nora, who responded by burying her golden head deep into her mother’s shoulder. Despite her disquiet, Arie chuckled.

“I’m afraid an unwell little one is not much for socializing,” Madison apologized. She stroked Nora’s back and the little girl seemed to relax.

The trio sat quietly for several minutes as Madison rubbed Nora’s back and hummed softly. Eventually, the toddler’s movements became more sporadic and her body more relaxed. When her petite little frame had completely collapsed into the heavy weight of sleep that seemed to be reserved especially for children, Madison finally stopped stroking her back.

“I came to find you to tell you that I’ve asked the cook to prepare a special meal this evening to celebrate your and Lee’s engagement,” Madison said, keeping her voice low.

“Madison, that is not necessary. You know it is not ... like that.”

“You told me to congratulate you, remember? And this is my way of doing it. Besides, our cook is French. He will take any excuse to make an extravagant meal.” Nora squirmed. Her mother resumed patting her bottom rhythmically.

Arie gripped the arms of the chair she sat in. “Maddie ... I don’t know where he is.”

“You don’t know where who is?”

“Lord Bayfield.”

“Lee? He must be around here somewhere. It is a very large castle –”

“No – he left this morning after breakfast without telling the staff – or me – where he was going.”

Madison froze with her hand comically in the air two inches above Nora's little bottom. "What?"

Arie shrugged helplessly.

"I am sure he will be back. Perhaps he just went into town to post a letter or something." But despite her words, Madison's face was clouded. "He would never abandon you, Arie, if that is what you are thinking."

"I know." Arie had plaited her curly dark blonde hair simply this morning, but the braid was so long that it fell over her shoulder. She gazed out the window onto the snow-covered estate as she toyed with the end of her braid. Far in the distance from where she now sat, she could just make out the rise that was home to the old castle. "I just wish I knew where he's gone."



ARIE COULD VERY MUCH have used an intervention from the supposedly magical Carcliffe Castle. For instance, the stone floor could have opened up and swallowed her whole. Or all the candles and gas lamps lining the walls of the formal dining room could have all miraculously gone out at the same time, allowing her to escape. At the very least, there could have been some window-banging or door-slamming to distract the other guests. But alas, none of those things happened.

Instead, Arie sat in the middle of the vast dining table as course after fantastic course was laid in front of her, the bride-to-be and guest of honor. And she was alone.

Madison had seated the Wilks family as far as physically possible from her. At least that was a small mercy. And Drake – who had conspicuously ignored her after having lavished attention on her the three days prior – was seated with them.

Arie was grateful for the kind faces surrounding her: Madison on her left, the kind Kelly and her quiet husband across. But the vacant chair beside her spoke painfully loud for all its emptiness.

"I apologize for my sister and Christopher. They sent word that they were held up in the village. I am sure they will join us very soon," Madison said.

"Because their absence is the one of note," Henry said under his breath beside her. Arie saw Madison's body jerk and a grimace of pain cross Henry's face.

"It's alright," Arie said, leaning forward so she could speak to Henry as well. "On both accounts. I am sure that Lee would not have gone away unless it was important," Arie said with as much courage as she could muster. She was saved from further comment by the arrival of the next course.

It took two footmen to carry in the huge platter, artfully arranged with hot water crust pastry and three hens which had been roasted whole and dressed in a fragrant French sauce. Despite her discomfort, Arie felt her stomach rumble hungrily.

She took a hearty serving, thinking about the way her mother had often advised her to eat smaller portions so she might appear dainty to any gentleman present at the table. *Well, it certainly did not matter now* – not that she'd ever heeded that advice before.

Just as she was about to take a bite, the doors to the dining room opened and Meera and Christopher swept in. They had taken the time to change into their evening attire – the staff must have alerted them that there was a special meal on tonight. Arie did appreciate the gesture. It made her feel like less of an afterthought.

“Good evening! Arie, please please please forgive us! I had no notion that it was going to take so long in town. We’ve had these crates shipped from Egypt and it will be a minor miracle if they make it.” Meera gripped Arie’s shoulders and pressed her cheek to hers familiarly. Arie could not help but smile. Despite the sisters’ many differences, Meera had the same forthright manner and unwavering kindness that had endeared Madison to her when they first met all those years ago.

Christopher tugged his wife along, pulling out her chair for her before sitting himself. He placed his napkin in his lap and then looked up the table slowly. His brow furrowed. “Where is Lee?”

Madison opened her mouth to speak, but Arie beat her to it. “He departed sometime this morning, destination unknown.” She tried to keep her voice cheery.

“He went to ... he ought to have been back by now.”

Arie felt a little lurch in her gut. “You know where he is?”

“Yes, we spoke this morning after breakfast. But I expected him back by now.”

“Where has he gone?” Arie asked directly. The conversation from the rest of the table seemed to quiet just in time to hear Christopher’s response.

Christopher looked awkwardly down at his lap and then back at Arie. “I think he should be the one to tell you.”

“But he is not here,” Arie said irritably. She’d been a bastion of composure and poise but even she had her limits.

Christopher raised both his hands in his defense. “He should have been back this evening. I am sure he will be here tomorrow morning to explain for himself.”

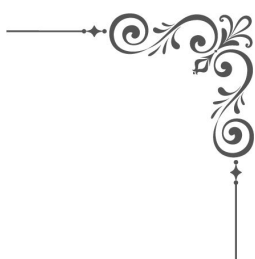
Henry made a disgusted noise from across the table. “Come on Bowden, he’s clearly given over any right to privacy by not showing up.”

But Christopher was not swayed. He shook his head. "It is a private matter for my brother and Miss Pratt."

"Well then, it would have been nice if he told *Miss Pratt* what the devil was going on." And with that, Arie stuffed another fat piece of chicken into her mouth.



*On the fourth day of Christmas my true love sent to me
Four colly birds ...*



Chapter 9

December 28th, 1815

The horse pounded into the courtyard in front of Carcliffe Castle with such gusto it sent the clump of crows milling about in the dirt fleeing into the air. Lee counted them unconsciously as he dismounted – *one, two, three, four*.

He'd left London at first light. It was not advisable to travel at night; the roads were not safe, especially for a singular rider who rode unarmed. He was already annoyed that he'd been unable to get back yesterday. He'd left Carcliffe Castle as early as he could manage, but it still had not been enough time. The Archbishop had kept him waiting for several hours.

The door swung open as Lee climbed the front stairs. The butler himself stood ready to take his overcoat.

"Good morning, my lord."

"To you as well," Lee said, perfunctorily observing the niceties. "Is Miss Pratt awake?"

"She has not yet called for a maid, my lord."

Michaelson must have seen him coming and checked on Miss Pratt's status. "When she does, please send word with her maid that I need to speak with her as soon as possible."

"Of course, sir."

"I'll be in the card room, if you could send some tea."

"Very good."

Lee chose the card room – *or smoking room, whatever it was* – that they'd passed through before getting locked in together because it was not frequented by other guests.

The chairs were organized into small groups, bunched around circular tables. Lee chose a seat tucked into the far corner of the room with his back to the wall and a good view of both doors. He did not want to be caught unawares. There was one person he needed to speak to this morning, and one person only: Harriet.

She appeared just after the hour struck ten o'clock in the morning. A distinct departure from her early morning jaunt yesterday which had ended in such misadventure.

She was dressed in a white and blue striped muslin gown that hugged her bust most flatteringly, an effect further accentuated by the

matching sash tied around her waist. The sleeves puffed slightly at the shoulders before tapering down into fitted sleeves that reached her wrists. The all-over stripes made her look long and graceful.

But her walk was hesitant. She approached him slowly, looking him up and down.

"You've just returned." She stated it as a fact rather than a query.

"I have."

"It was quite rude of you to leave without giving any explanation." Her tone was perfectly calm. She spoke as she poured her cup of tea from the tray between them as if nothing was amiss.

"Rude? I have never been accused of such a thing –"

"And yet, here we are. It is rude to depart suddenly without telling your betrothed where you are off to."

"You couldn't have thought I'd thrown you over –"

"No, I did not. But I am sure the thought crossed the minds of the other guests in attendance."

"Not anyone who knows me."

"I do not know you."

"And yet we are to be married."

Arie scowled. "I suppose you are about to tell me that your disappearance was to obtain a special license."

Lee's eyebrow quirked. "You are quite clever."

"Not clever enough to avoid this debacle."

"You do know how to flatter a man, Miss Pratt."

"After four seasons, I am something of an expert," Arie said sarcastically.

"Dare I ask why you are still unmarried after four seasons in London?"

Arie feigned a look of shock. In truth, she was much too thick-skinned to be bothered by such a question, rude as it was. She was more surprised that Lord Bayfield had asked such a question. He was becoming bolder by the hour.

Lee was not fooled. He met her gaze, even and confident.

"I have not found a satisfactory suitor."

"And do you consider me satisfactory?" Lee asked from beneath raised eyebrows. She was such a beautiful woman. Incredibly smart and interesting to talk to. He was sure she'd had dozens of suitors over the years. *What about them had not measured up?* He wondered.

"I consider you inevitable," she said plainly.

"Again with the flattery." Lee sighed.

Arie bit her lip, torn between a laugh and an apology. None of this was Lee's fault, she reminded herself. He had been a victim of the castle's machinations – and Susan's nosiness – as much as she.

"I hope that we shall suit since we are to be husband and wife,"

she said softly – a small peace offering.

Her eyes fluttered downward, showcasing the contrast of her dark lashes against her pale skin.

Deciding it was time to take a chance, Lee reached out and took Arie's hand. She looked a bit perturbed but she did not pull it away. "I am sorry I left without leaving word," Lee said genuinely. "I told Christopher where I was going. I assumed he would convey the message."

It took a lot of effort for her to think straight. The *zing* of awareness that traveled up her arm from their joined hands, the earnestness of his voice, and the way he appealed to her with his intoxicating blue eyes – *would she ever get used to it?*

"I forgive you," she said softly.

They were interrupted by the sound of the door opening. Ada the maid swept into the room with a fresh pot of tea and a plate of scones. "Good morning to you both!" She said brightly. "And a hearty congratulations." She refilled both of their teacups, winked at Arie, and then departed.

"You've got a special license. I assume that means you would like to have the ceremony soon?" Arie stirred honey into her tea and tried to avoid getting trapped in that heady gaze of his.

Lee nodded slowly. "If you would like to wait until your family can be present, I understand. I just thought – well, young Susan will start talking as soon as she can. Best we have the thing accomplished as soon as possible."

"Let's do it here."

"At Carcliffe Castle?"

"Yes. We're already emotionally attached to the tapestries in the chapel."

"Alright. When?"

"Tomorrow."

Lee leaned back in his seat, his eyebrows shooting skyward. "Tomorrow?"

Arie shrugged. "Why not?"

In reality, Arie was afraid that if they waited too long she would talk herself out of the whole thing. Right now, she was so mixed up with thoughts and feelings that she'd brought out her own most effective coping mechanism: practicality. She was compromised, they needed to be married, so they should have done with it. If she allowed herself too much time to think – or to feel – the enormity of it would come crashing down upon her.

Lee cocked his head to one side, trying to discern what was happening behind those dusky gray eyes. He'd thought perhaps on New Year's Day, or after Epiphany just before everyone left Carcliffe

Castle – not much time, but still a matter of days or even a week for them to get to know each other a little better. What was her rush?

You are getting exactly what you want, you damned fool.

From that first night they met, Lee had known she was the woman he'd unconsciously been waiting for. He needed to stop questioning his good fortune. And yet ...

"Unless you have some reason to delay? Young Susan perhaps?"

"Susan?"

"She was following you. That's how she happened upon us out on the ruins, I am sure of it."

He was sure of it as well. But he did not see what one thing had to do with the other.

"Perhaps you unwittingly encouraged her ..."

"I have never had any designs on that girl, I promise you," Lee huffed. "She's half my age. Less than!"

Arie bit her lip. She did not think he would appreciate her laughing at this particular moment. "And how old are you, my lord viscount?"

She was teasing him, he realized belatedly. "Thirty-seven. Wait, how old –"

"I am twenty-four," Arie said promptly.

Lee sighed as he did the math. "Thirteen. That cannot be a good omen."

"I am a mature twenty-four," she assured him, her eyes sparkling mischievously. "And for a man nearing forty, you are surely –"

"That's enough."

"As you wish, my lord."

"You are going to have to call me by my given name eventually." Lee crossed his arms across his chest and looked at her expectantly. "We are to be married, after all."

Now it was Arie's turn to look flustered. "I am still accustoming myself to that notion."

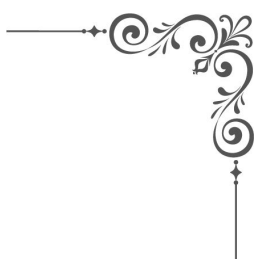
Lee thought about pushing her a bit further, just as retribution for her teasing about young Miss Wilks. But he thought better of it instead.

"Alright, tomorrow. I will speak with Henry and the vicar and have it arranged."

And so the date was set.



*On the fifth day of Christmas my true love sent to me
Five gold rings ...*



Chapter 10

December 29th, 1815

K*nock knock!*

Arie jumped so high she nearly upset the dressing table in front of her. The cup of tea she'd been sipping at nervously sloshed unforgivingly onto the polished wood surface. Luckily, Meera was made of sterner stuff. She continued to artfully arrange Arie's curls with such finesse, she might not have even heard the rap on the door.

"I will see who it is," Madison said reassuringly.

Meera had been recruited to help arrange Arie's hair before the wedding ceremony. Madison had admitted very honestly that she had no skill at such a task, given her preference for wearing her hair loose around her shoulders. Arie could have managed on her own, but she appreciated the offer of female solidarity. It was comforting to have Meera and Madison around her since her mother and sister were not.

There was a muffled voice from behind the door.

"He cannot see her," Madison said sharply.

The disembodied voice spoke again, the words indiscernible.

"Alright. Go and fetch them from him and I will present them to her myself."

Again, the voice.

Madison made an exasperated sound. "Alright, I will come along then. I will be right back," she said over her shoulder to Arie and Meera before disappearing out the door.

"What in the world do you think that was about?"

Meera shrugged. "Who knows. Probably something to do with the supper or the decorations or whatever occupies a marchioness."

Arie spied the smile tugging at the corners of Meera's lips. "You do enjoy poking fun at her, don't you?"

"What are younger sisters for, if not sticking pins in the elder?"

Meera punctuated her statement by sticking one last pin into Arie's hair and then stepping back to admire her handiwork.

Leaning forward to get a better look in the mirror, Arie felt her pulse start fluttering wildly. She did indeed look like a bride. Her hair was parted at the center and then twisted back gracefully from each temple, over the tops of her ears, and then pinned into a chignon at the nape of her neck. A true artist, Meera had woven a diamond

necklace from Arie's collection into the twists. The sparkles caught the light brilliantly as she moved her head from side to side.

"It's marvelous, Meera."

Meera's smile deepened. "You are a stunning bride."

"I still cannot believe –"

"Lord, what an infuriating man." Madison came into the room with a slam of the door behind her.

"Henry?" Arie quirked an eyebrow curiously.

"Christopher!"

Meera just laughed and sat down in front of the dressing table mirror to see to her own hair.

"Was that him outside in the corridor?" Arie asked.

"Yes. He came with a message from Lee, insisting that he see you before the ceremony."

"That's bad luck," Meera interjected.

"That is what I told Christopher."

"If Lee needs to see me, then perhaps –"

Madison shook her head decisively. "No, I've got it well in hand. Quite literally. Here." She motioned Arie forward to the low table positioned between two wingback chairs before the fireplace. Madison laid out a small packet of linen fabric and carefully unfolded it. Five golden rings tumbled loose, shining brightly in the mix of firelight and early afternoon sun spilling from the windows.

"This is what Lee needed to see me about?" Arie sat down in one of the chairs and leaned down to examine the rings closer.

"He wants you to pick one. For your wedding ring," Madison clarified.

"Where did he get them?" Arie picked one up, resting it on the tip of her finger to examine it closer. It held a yellow citrine stone in a nest of tiny seed pearls, fashioned to look like a flower. She set it down gently and picked up the next. "I cannot imagine he travels with women's rings."

"That one was their mother's," Meera said helpfully, picking up a rose-cut sapphire.

Arie set down the round cut diamond embedded in a gold crowned heart she'd been examining. "Do you suppose he picked them out when he went to Canterbury?"

"Did he go to Canterbury or London?" Madison asked, examining a flawlessly white pearl set between ornate gold filigree and an equally detailed band.

"Well, I guess he did not say ..." Arie trailed off, picking up the last ring. Without thinking, she slipped it onto her finger. It was a wide gold band set with a singular shimmering opal.

"That suits you perfectly."

Arie could not help but agree. It also fit her finger perfectly. Things were going ... well, perfectly. Her hair looked lovely. Here were these beautiful rings of which she would get her pick. Madison's maid had returned that morning with her favorite gown, perfectly mended. Perfect. Perfect. Perfect.

Except for the part where she was marrying out of necessity rather than love. Practicality rather than romance. Arie sighed. No matter how perfect it seemed, it was hard not to feel deflated.

Above her head, Madison and Meera exchanged a loaded glance.

"I will just return these to Lee and tell him which you've chosen." Madison gathered up the rings, accepting the opal back from Arie, and folded them neatly back into the square of linen.

"I left my gown in my chamber. I will go and dress now," Meera said, following her sister out the door.

Arie chuckled at the two sisters. They seemed to think she needed some space, and she certainly did not mind being alone. She was used to it – enjoyed the quiet solace of a room unshared by – *well, she used to enjoy it*. Arie looked around the room she'd occupied since her arrival at Carcliffe Castle and realized ... these were probably her last few minutes in it. Surely, once she went downstairs for the wedding ceremony a team of maids and footmen would sweep in and relocate her belongings to the suite where Lee was staying.

In just a few hours, she would be sharing a room for the first time since childhood. Nigh on fifteen years since she and her sister had emerged from the nursery. Marriage was proving to be unexpected in ways she could not quite wrap her head around. Tonight, they would share a room ... *and a bed?*

She started to tug her hand through her hair, to catch a curl and twirl it around her finger, but her hand scraped against the diamonds that Meera had so expertly woven into place. Arie yanked her hand back as if burned.

Oh, enough of this nonsense. Get dressed and get on with the damn thing.



LEE KNEW WHICH RING she would choose. Meera had his mother's ring with her and had happily offered it when she overheard Lee and Christopher discussing it just before he left to obtain the special license. While he waited for an audience with the Archbishop – who was staying in London, a fact the Lee only knew because of a conversation he'd had in passing before coming to Carcliffe Castle – he'd dropped into a jeweler and selected a few other possibilities to offer to Arie. The opal ring was his own. He'd won it in a game of cards – something he rarely did – many years ago. He'd taken to

occasionally wearing it on his pinky finger. And he just happened to have it with him at Carcliffe Castle. He'd tossed it into the mix at the last moment, just before he handed the linen parcel over to Madison.

Of course, Arie had chosen the opal. It was layered, multi-faceted, seemed to shine all on its own – just like her. When Lee slipped it onto her finger while the vicar spoke the words of the wedding service in Carcliffe Castle's storied chapel, he felt a profound sense of rightness.

They were not alone for a single moment from the second Arie appeared at the end of the chapel holding her spray of winter roses, through the sumptuous evening meal that Madison planned, all the way into the library where the group of revelers adjourned.

Catching her hand as they walked through the gallery into the library, Lee leaned over and whispered in Arie's ear: "We do not have to stay long. You must be exhausted."

Arie nodded. That was all the encouragement that Lee needed. He started to draw her back towards the door. She opened her mouth to speak –

"You cannot leave yet!"

"We all know you're excited to adjourn upstairs, but –"

The boisterous calls of Henry and Christopher dissolved into laughter and general merriment from the rest of the group. They'd come for a Christmas celebration and been rewarded with even more merriment – a wedding.

Arie blushed violently red. Lee's tightened his hold on her hand. "Just ignore them, let's go."

"Really, please wait a moment! We have gifts!" Madison exclaimed, motioning them towards the fireplace excitedly.

"Madison, that is not necessary," Arie said, shaking her head.

"It is just a few small things. We are practically family now." Madison handed her a carefully wrapped box about the size of a small teapot.

Arie offered it to Lee but he shook his head. She carefully peeled back the paper to reveal just that – an ornately engraved silver teapot. Arie turned it over in her hands, feeling the grooves and lines beneath the pads of her fingertips.

"I have the entire set for you, actually, but I thought I would just wrap this up for now," Madison explained.

"Madison, this is much too extravagant," Arie protested.

But Madison was ready for her. She started to speak, but Henry beat her to it.

"It was my idea. It has been at Carcliffe Castle for centuries. Since you met and married here, it felt appropriate."

Arie glanced at Lee, looking for help, but all he did was raise his eyebrows unhelpfully. They could not very well turn down a gift from

a marquess, friend of the family, and their host. Lee slid his hand around her waist and squeezed in what he hoped was a comforting fashion. However, the effect on him was that he was intensely aware of the heat of her waist beneath her iridescent gray skirts.

"I have something as well." Christopher stepped forward, a raffish grin on his face. He offered his parcel to Lee rather than Arie.

"Do I want to open this in mixed company?" Lee said, looking suspiciously at his brother. Regrettably, he had to pull his hand back from Arie's waist to open the gift. He thought he felt her sigh as he did so. From desire or relief?

Lee laughed aloud when he opened the wrappings. "Whatever am I supposed to do with this?"

Christopher smiled wickedly. "You thought it a timely gift for me at my wedding. I thought it only apt to pass it back along."

Lee tilted the cover so that Arie could see. It was a small pocketbook, bound in dark brown leather with the title "The Gentleman's Guide to Being a Most Exemplary Husband" emblazoned in gold letters on the front.

"It looks like it's never been opened," Lee said wryly as slid his finger between the pages and the book's spine gave the characteristic distinct *crack*.

Christopher put his hands up paired with a dramatic shrug. "Meera has not complained yet."

"On the contrary, I complain quite regularly," Meera interjected, looking down her nose at her husband.

Lee held up the petite volume. "I will take my duties quite seriously, I assure you." As soon as he said it, the room burst into laughter and he realized how his words had sounded. One glance over at Arie – she was the same beet red color as a few minutes earlier.

Lee cleared his throat loudly. "Thank you all, for your kind words of congratulations. I believe it is time for us to retire."

Without waiting for further comment, he took Arie's hand and led her out of the room.

"Thank goodness." He heard her mutter under her breath as they walked hand in hand down the long gallery that connected the library to the dining room and then the entry hall and onto the staircase to their new shared bed chamber. Lee was pleased that Arie seemed content to leave her hand in his. Their marriage might not have come about how either of them would have envisioned or hoped, but perhaps they would be alright.

"Were you as ready to get out of there as I was?"

"More," Arie said emphatically. "I have not been so fawned and fussed over since I had my debut. And even then, I shared the spotlight with my sister, Imelda."

“I should have thought you quite comfortable in the spotlight,” Lee mused as they climbed the stairs together.

“I am comfortable *next to* the spotlight. That’s why being friends with Madison has always suited me so well.”

Lee stopped as they reached the next floor and drew her hand to his lips. He placed a soft kiss on her knuckles, his mouth lingering there as he said: “You deserve to be in the spotlight all by yourself.”

The flush that had just faded threatened to crawl back up her cheeks again. Arie emulated her new husband and cleared her throat to break the silence. “Do you think you can find your way this time around?” She said in a passable facsimile of teasing.

Lee cleared his throat unironically. He lowered her hand and led the way to the Alderwood Suite. He opened the door for her, careful not to break the link of their hands. It felt important somehow.

Arie stepped into the room and started to draw her hand away, but Lee held her fast. He led her through the sitting room and into the adjoining bedroom. As she looked around the room, he stepped closer to her. Alone at last.

He reached up with his free hand and stroked down her face very gently. More than anything, he wanted to kiss her. The look on her face was unreadable. Nervous, uncomfortable, anticipatory ... he did not know.

“We are married now,” Lee said huskily.

“Yes.” Arie nodded.

“Husband and wife.”

“That is what the vicar said.”

“So, shall we ...?”

Arie looked at him from under raised brows, her lips parted in an expression that was equal parts amusement and disdain. “I think we’ve done quite enough. That is how we ended up here in the first place.”

Lee dropped her hand in surprise. “Surely you don’t mean –”

“Oh, I surely do.” Arie took several long steps, grabbed a pillow from the bed, and threw it directly at him. Perhaps a bit more forcefully than was necessary. “You may sleep on the chaise.”

Lee stared at her in disbelief. Sure, there had not been much time to discuss their expectations of married life. But he had never imagined that Arie would outright refuse him. On their wedding night, no less. He looked from his new wife to the pillow he had caught out of reflex, to the less than inviting chaise, and back again.

He looked like a puppy in want of an owner, Arie thought. And she was tempted to tell him he could share her bed – for sleeping in, at least. But she was not ready for that. She’d barely had time to adjust to the notion that after four years of spinsterhood she was a married

woman. And now she was expected to give herself to a man she hardly knew, as quick as you please?

No.

"I appreciate your understanding," she said with a queenly nod. She turned away to avoid any further conversation. The maid had laid out her nightclothes and then disappeared, surely meaning to give the newlywed couple their privacy. Arie snatched up the night rail and dressing gown and stepped behind the three-panel screen in the corner.

Lee watched in shock. She'd carried a candle back with her and set it on the little dressing table next to the screen. The light cast her silhouette against the painted panels with startling detail. He was sure she had no idea that as she drew off her gown and removed her stockings and petticoats, he could see every curve of hip, calf, and breast.

He should turn away. He was only making things worse for himself by watching this spectacle. But he couldn't. Lee was completely transfixed. And realizing that this was the most of his new wife that he was likely to see on his wedding night. Groaning, he started undressing.

Arie jumped when she stepped out from behind the screen. She was very modestly attired in a night rail that tied at her throat with a lavender ribbon underneath a brocade embroidered silver and black dressing gown. Her husband, meanwhile, stood before her in nothing but his shirt and stockings.

"I ... haven't you ... a nightshirt or something?" She stammered.

"I did not think I would need one," Lee said quite honestly. "My shirt is the best I can do. And my stockings. This castle gets cold at night."

Arie felt a twinge of guilt. The chaise would undoubtedly be colder and less cozy than the large four-poster bed. But even as she contemplated offering some sort of middle ground, Lee took the pillow she'd tossed his way and started making up a makeshift bed on the sofa.

She walked slowly to the bed, dousing candles as she went. She pulled back the heavy coverlet from the bed, wrapped it in her arms, and offered it to Lee. He accepted it with a wry and wordless smile and quirk of his eyebrow. Finally, all that was left was the fire burning steadily in the grate, banked by the servants sometime before their arrival.

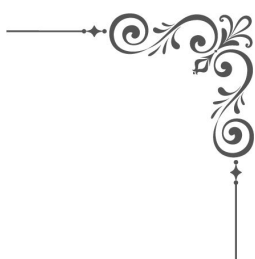
She climbed into the huge bed, sliding beneath the blankets "Well, goodnight then."

A slightly muffled, disgruntled sound emerged from the pile of blankets and pillows that was Lee. "Goodnight, Arie."

Arie closed her eyes determinedly and summoned sleep. But she laid awake for an inordinately long time, feeling like something was quite amiss.



*On the sixth day of Christmas my true love sent to me
Six geese a laying ...*



Chapter 11

December 30th, 1815

“G et up!” Lee thundered, pulling Arie from the bed bodily.

Arie did not know what was happening. Her eyes were still heavy with sleep. As she opened them, they burned with smoke. Her next breath was a hacking cough. Lee dumped her unceremoniously on the other side of the bed and then raced away from her.

Pulling her night rail up over her nose and mouth to block the smoke, Arie tried to get a grip on what was happening. The flames were coming from the other side of the bed. She saw Lee searching for something to douse the flames.

“Behind the screen!” She yelled.

She was not sure Lee heard her, but then he disappeared behind the screen she’d changed behind earlier, emerging with the pitcher of water from the table there. A few long steps and he dumped it over the flames.

An unnerving hiss filled the room as the fire went out and the water steamed. Suddenly, Lee was beside her again. Then his arms were around her, running urgently over her body.

“I am alright,” she managed to say, though she’d taken no personal stock of her own body. Arie realized she was gripping his arms tightly, her gaze flying over him and assessing his wellbeing. “We are both alright,” she said, amazed at the steadiness of her voice.

Lee nodded, his face stoic. Arie could see the sweat on his brow and around the side of his face, easily visible as it streamed from his close-cropped dark hair. Just as her pulse had been calming, her heartbeat skipped unsteadily again.

“What happened?” Arie asked, looking back to the other side of the bed.

Lee shook his head. “I’m not sure.”

They walked together around the foot of the four-poster bed. Lee went to open the windows to clear the smoke while Arie examined the table beside the bed. The engraved silver teapot sat on the table, its wrappings burned to ashes. Arie touched the pool of melted wax gingerly.

“I thought you put out all the candles.” Lee appeared at her shoulder, looking down with the same confused look on his face.

“I did.” He could not see her furrowed brow in the dim light, but he could hear it.

Arie tentatively touched the teapot. It was hot, but she was able to pick it up. It appeared undamaged.

“The candle must not have gone out all the way,” Lee said, though he could hear the disbelief in his voice.

“What time is it?”

Lee glanced towards the mantle clock, its hands just visible. “Past midnight.” Arie shivered as a cold breeze swept into the room. “Come, let’s sit by the fire for a few minutes while the smoke clears out, and then we will go back to bed. There’s no need to wake the rest of the house.”

Arie followed Lee over to the chair opposite his sofa-turned-bed. She did not protest as he draped the coverlet around her shoulders. He went to fetch an overcoat and his boots to keep himself warm. While she waited, Arie turned the teapot over in her hands carefully, soaking up its warmth. Nearer now to the fire, she could see the engravings. She tipped it towards the firelight to get a clearer look. It was a pastoral scene, with rolling grassy hills around a lake. She could just barely make out the six little ducks – or were they geese? – depicted in the middle of the picturesque lake.

“Are you warm enough?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you need another blanket? Your pelisse?” Lee was standing over her, his face a bit anxious.

“I am plenty warm,” Arie assured him, drawing her legs up underneath her and tightening her grip on the coverlet. She let the teapot rest in her lap, an orb of warmth against her legs.

Once she was settled, Lee took back his place on the chaise. He watched as Arie’s eyes drifted closed, the warmth of the fire and the layers lulling her back to sleep. He pulled his jacket tighter around himself and determinedly kept his eyes open.



WHEN SHE WOKE THE NEXT morning, the windows were closed and Lee was gone. She was still ensconced in her little cocoon before the fireplace. Arie slowly unfolded herself, painfully aware of the creaks and twinges in her limbs from sleeping in such a cramped position.

Lee must have gotten up at some point in the night to close the windows, but the smell of smoke still lingered. The teapot was still in her hand – she set it on the dressing table rather than the little table where it had somehow escaped the flames. Lee had cleaned that away, too. She must have really been asleep.

Realizing there was not much else to do, Arie rang for a maid to

help her through her morning ablutions. When she descended the stairs an hour later, fully dressed and having eaten a light breakfast from the tea tray in her new bed chamber, Lee was waiting for her.

He stood like a sentinel at the foot of the stairs, his dark hair neatly combed and his upright bearing unmistakable. Arie smiled awkwardly. "Good morning ... Lee." She tried out his name and found it surprisingly pleasing.

"Would you like to go for a walk?" Lee asked.

Arie pursed her lips. There was a fresh layer of snow on the ground and it was quite cold outside. She'd discovered that when she popped open the window of her – *their* – room this morning to try and air out the lingering smoky smell. Generally, she enjoyed being out of doors, but there was something in Lee's manner that made her wary.

"Alright," she said slowly. "Give me a moment to get something warmer –"

"No need! There's Ada now." He nodded over her shoulder. The maid was coming down the hallway holding Arie's fur-lined gray pelisse. Now she knew Lee was up to something. She opened her mouth to retort but he cut her off. "The sky is blue for the first time in days. I was hoping I could convince you. We don't know each other well, but there's only one way to change that."

He was so earnest and those bright blue eyes so genuine, Arie felt her thick wall of icy defenses start to thaw. They were married, after all. What was she going to achieve by continuing to put him off?

Ignoring the irony of that thought, she allowed Ada to help her into the pelisse. She fastened the long row of dark-colored buttons that ran up to the hollow of her throat and then pulled up the hood over her head. She'd go out and walk with him if that was what he wanted, but she was not going to freeze her ears off in the process.

Arie followed Lee outside. For a moment, it looked as if he was going to walk towards the ruins of the old castle. But he seemed to think better of it and walked instead in the direction of the lake that lay about a half-mile down the drive.

They walked in silence for a while. *Hadn't he suggested getting to know each other?* Well, there was only one way to do that.

"Why haven't I seen you in London? Your younger brother seems to have made the rounds, but I do not recall ever even hearing your name mentioned," Arie asked in her characteristic straightforward manner.

"I have not had much cause to go to London. Since my father passed on, I've spent most of my time at the estate. I do go to the capital occasionally, of course, but I stay away from the social whirl." As they walked Lee clasped his hands behind his back, then brought them around to his front, then around back again. He desperately

wanted to pull her arm into his but after last night he was not sure how she would react.

Arie was looking away, gazing off in the other direction with a contemplative look upon her face. A new thought occurred to Lee. "I suppose you must be thinking that you will miss London. I suppose we can arrange –"

She shook her head emphatically. "I have had enough London seasons to last a lifetime. The only reason I have been resident there so long is my ongoing attempts to avoid my mother pressuring me to marry. Now that she'll finally be appeased –" Arie shrugged "—I'd happily retire from city life."

Lee felt a little sunburst inside his chest despite the chilly weather. Riding that warmth, he stepped forward impetuously and slipped his arm through Arie's so they were linked together.

At first, Arie stiffened – *would she ever get used to being in such close, casual contact with a man?* – but as they moved she felt herself start to relax and settle into the embrace. Lee was the most respectful man she'd ever met. Despite his initial shock on discovering her reticence on their wedding night, he had not pushed her outside of her comfort zone. Though she sensed that the longer they went on in their state of unconsummated matrimony, the more anxious the ever-polite viscount would become.

They had reached the lakeside. They stood in companionable silence, arm in arm, looking on as a flock of birds landed on the water, sending ripples through the glassy surface. Arie chuckled softly.

Lee glanced over at her. "What is it?"

Arie nodded towards the flock of geese on the water. "It reminded me of that cursed teapot Madison gave us. It has an engraving of geese in a lake, just like this."

Lee chuckled too, shaking his head. "How that thing ever caught fire ..." he trailed off, rubbing his hand over his chin.

"It was the wrappings. I must have left them too near the candle." Arie shivered despite her layers and Lee's nearness. Almost obsessively attentive to her needs, Lee immediately turned her back towards Carcliffe Castle.

"I saw you put out all the candles."

She clucked her tongue. "Then what could it have been?"

"You're not going to like my answer."

For a moment she furrowed her brow, not understanding. Then she clucked her tongue more loudly and swatted his arm playfully. "You cannot be implying the castle had something to do with it!"

"I saw you put out the candles. That is all I am saying ..." Lee trailed off.

Arie looked up at him questioningly – they were about halfway

back to the house – and realized he was gazing into the distance. Her eyes followed the direction of his furrowed brow.

They were several hundred yards away from the hill upon which stood the old castle ruins. She'd glanced at them on their way out and they'd look much as they had that fateful morning three days before: snow-covered, mysterious, deserted. Except now they weren't deserted. A figure was picking their way through the half-collapsed outer wall on the west side.

"Is that ...?"

"Drake," Lee finished for her. "I would have thought the other guests had learned from our situation."

"Perhaps Mr. Thornton is hoping to stumble upon his own heiress to compromise," Arie said wryly.

Lee's eyebrows shifted from furrowed to raised as he turned his eyes back to her. "I am not sure which part of that statement to ask about first."

Arie's lips curved impishly. "Well, I am an heiress, by the way. My father has no sons, and most of the property is not entailed to his title. As the eldest sister, I stand to inherit quite a bit of land, rents, and so on."

"I had no idea," Lee shook his head. "I suppose we ought to have seen to that before the wedding."

Arie shrugged dismissively. "Madison assured me you were not a fortune-hunter. *That one*, however," she nodded meaningfully to where Drake stood. *Well, where he had stood*. He'd disappeared deeper into the snow-capped rubble.

"You think he's a fortune-hunter?"

Arie nodded emphatically. "Unequivocally."

"I had him pegged as simply a rake. And an arse."

"Ha!" Arie gripped Lee's arm to keep her balance as she giggled. "That is the second time I've heard you swear! I knew you must have it in you!"

Lee licked his cold lips, feeling them turn upward. "A gentleman does not curse in a lady's presence."

"I am not just any lady though, am I?" Arie teased, pursing her pretty lips. "I am your wife."

They'd reached the front stairs of Carcliffe Castle. Lee pulled his arm closer in towards his body, thereby pulling her closer as well. "That you are," he said huskily.

The cold air from her sharp intake of breath shocked her chest – a stark contrast to the heat that Lee sent spreading through her.

Resisting the urge to pull her closer yet against him and kiss her soundly, Lee instead cleared his throat and nodded towards the castle, whose large doors were already swinging open for them. "Let's get

warmed up, shall we?"



THEY WERE PULLED IN opposite directions for the rest of the day. Madison invited Arie to an embroidery circle – which seemed to Lee the dullerest thing he'd ever heard of but for some reason was appealing to his new wife. Meanwhile, Henry organized a shooting session for the male guests.

By the time they returned to their shared rooms, it was time to dress for the evening meal. Arie disappeared behind the screen once again and Lee managed with his valet out in the sitting room. When Ada departed, Lee knew Arie must be mostly ready. He dismissed his valet and walked slowly into the bedroom.

Arie was looking in the mirror as she put in sapphire earrings that perfectly complemented the blue-gray slate color of her evening gown.

"You look lovely."

She tried to stuff down the blush that threatened. "Thank you."

"You always look lovely. I thought it the first moment I saw you, and every moment in between."

As it turned out, holding the crimson at bay was a pointless endeavor. "You're being silly," she demurred.

Lee shook his head. "No. I have been captivated by you since I first arrived at Carcliffe Castle."

Arie turned around, her brow furrowed. "You're being honest," she said disbelievingly, as if she could not quite get her mind around his words.

"I am," Lee nodded. "Arie, I ..." He trailed off, considering his next move. He was not normally so direct. But it seemed to work well enough for Arie.

"I would not have gone about it like this if it had been mine to choose. I would have courted you. Called on you in London or at your family home to express my interest properly. We would have taken walks in the snow and carriage rides in the park."

"We have taken two walks through the snow," Arie pointed out unhelpfully. She bit her lip to keep from laughing at the look that Lee gave her.

"All I am trying to say is that ... well, I hold you in very high regard. And I am sorry for how this happened, but I am not sorry to have you as my wife," Lee finished, punctuating the statement with a sharp nod.

Despite the short sleeves of her gown, Arie felt overwhelmingly hot. She hadn't packed any fans for her trip to Carcliffe Castle. It seemed a moot point in the dead of winter. She breathed in slowly,

her lips forming a little 'o' as she let the air out again.

"Lee, I need to tell you something."

His heart jumped as his name slid from her mouth. But the tone of her voice gave him pause.

"You can tell me anything," he said. The words sounded quite grave. "I am your husband, after all." He tried to infuse that with a wry quirk of his lips, but Arie just chewed her lower lip worriedly. "Go ahead," he said more gently.

Arie took another deep breath and slow exhalation.

"I have never ... kissed a man before."

"But ... you kissed me at our wedding," Lee said slowly.

"Yes. And that was the first time." Her hands were clasped tightly in front of her but she did not look down. She looked right at him – straightforward and true, as in everything.

"Surely a kiss on the cheek –"

"Only with my father and brother-in-law."

"I had no idea."

Arie shrugged as if it was inconsequential. "Most young women dabble, of course. And some suitors tried. But I was always very careful with my reputation ... until I was not," she said cynically, recalling the circumstances of her engagement and marriage.

"Arie." Lee shifted his weight awkwardly, trying to put together the words in a polite way. "You do understand how it is, between a husband and a wife –"

"Coupling? The marriage bed?" She interrupted, her voice rising a few octaves as she spoke. But she brazened it out. "Of course I do. My mother explained it to my sister and me when we made our debut."

"I see." Lee bit his cheek to keep from chuckling. The last thing he wanted was to make her feel foolish when she was finally being forthright with him. "Would you like to kiss me, Arie?"

She paled – a considerable feat considering the already pale luster of her skin. This whole conversation had been so preposterous she had thus far been able to ignore the implications and the inevitable path down which it was leading. But now ... she swallowed hard. There was only one answer.

"Yes, I would." Anything else would have been a lie.

Lee caught her hand in his and stepped closer. She might have been trembling. Her hands were cool to the touch. He would speak to the Warsham's staff about keeping a fire going in their rooms. Arie tended towards cold, he'd noticed.

He wanted to pull her into his arms, crush her body against his, and kiss her with all the ardor that had been building inside him from their first meeting on Christmas Eve. He settled for holding one of her hands in his own, while his other hand settled on her hip and guided

her slowly closer to him so that their bodies were just touching.

She could feel his heat through all of her layers of silk and petticoats. For days, she had been holding back and fighting the attraction she felt for him. How many times since her arrival at Carcliffe Castle had she caught herself dreaming of leaning into his comforting warmth? As Lee pressed a soft kiss to the tip of her nose, Arie decided it was time to give in. She let her body close the fraction of space between them so that their bodies were pressed together. And when he lowered his lips to hers, she opened her mouth to him.

He must grow whiskers very quickly.

That was her first thought.

Against the softness of his lips, she felt the contrast of stubble on his upper lip. She was sure a man as devoted to decorum as Lee would shave every morning. He must grow whiskers quite quickly for her to be feeling them against her skin by this evening. Or perhaps he had missed a spot when shaving that morning.

Her second thought was – *oh, lord.*

She'd never kissed another man and at that moment she was grateful she never had. If kissing any man was half as intoxicating as kissing Lee, she would have never gotten so comfortable up on her shelf.

He tasted like wine and warmth. There was something darker ... sandalwood? Bergamot? Something in his aftershave. His unique and intoxicating scent invaded her senses at the same time that his tongue gently invaded her mouth.

For a moment Arie was startled – what was this? This could not possibly be right. But then his tongue pulled hers into a curving dance, inviting her to explore his mouth as deeply and fully as he was discovering hers. A sound echoed from her body – *had she made it?* – a deep moan several octaves below her usual resonance. Lee met it with a groan of his own. His hand on her hip tightened, pulling her closer to him.

Arie felt the heat of his body and then something hard and insistent pressing against her skirts. She yelped. Lee chuckled, his lips still on hers, the motion of his chest rocking them both. He slowly withdrew, tracing his tongue over each of her lips before drawing back so the cool air could rush in between them.

"You are a novice no more," he said after a few long breaths.

"That quickly?" She couldn't help but tease.

"You are a fast learner."

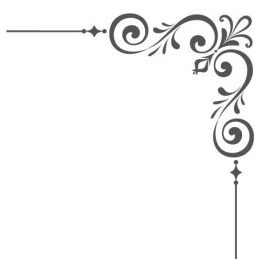
"Does that make you a good tutor?"

"We shall see as the lessons progress." Lee's voice was heavy with implication. If it was up to him, he would have led her back through the sitting room and laid her on the bed right then. But he could see

that Arie was still reeling from their kiss. He gritted his teeth and resigned himself to another night spent on the uncomfortable sofa.



*On the seventh day of Christmas my true love sent to me
Seven swans a swimming ...*



Chapter 12

December 31st, 1815

There was a lull to the day between luncheon and the evening meal. In London – or even in the country when the weather was fair – this time would have been used for paying calls and socializing. But ensconced as they were at Carcliffe Castle beneath several feet of snow, no one was venturing outside much. Madison had industriously planned activities for her guests each day, but this afternoon was left blank. It was New Year's Eve and most of the guests were taking advantage of this time to rest up for the evening's festivities.

Arie was reading in the sitting room of the Alderwood Suite, where she had joined Lee after their hasty wedding ceremony. Madison and Henry's staff had dutifully moved her things so they were waiting for her on her wedding night. The chaise she was sitting on had doubled as Lee's bed for the last two nights ... and it was not that comfortable. A twinge of guilt rippled through her. Perhaps it was time –

"I thought you would be napping like everyone else."

She nearly dropped her book. Lee stood across from her, the door already closed behind him. How had he entered so silently? This bloody castle ... silent one moment, carrying voices unnaturally far the next.

"I tried, but I couldn't fall asleep. I'd rather read than stare up at the ceiling."

"I would consider a nap myself, but you're sitting on my bed." Lee folded his arms.

Arie jumped up. "I am so sorry! Go ahead, I –"

"I am teasing you, Arie." He grinned. Arie gave a little half-laugh, half-sigh. Her heart leaped at his penetrating smile. Since their kissing lesson the day before, her heart and stomach had been doing acrobatic flips every time he looked at her.

Lee watched her as he moved closer, looking for any signs of distress or apprehension. He'd laid in bed – *well, on the chaise* – thinking of her for most of the night. In truth, he could do with a nap. When he got close enough to touch her, he reached out his hand.

Arie jumped again when he took the book rather than touch her.

"What are you reading?"

"*The Lady of the Lake*. I've read it before. But I find it comforting to

reread old favorites now and again.”

“Are you in need of comfort?” He quirked an eyebrow as he set the book aside.

“I find that I am a bit ... on edge,” she said honestly. His eyes caught hers, their mystical blue glinting strikingly. His dark, full eyelashes swept over the sapphire blue pools when he blinked.

Lee chuckled. “I know the exact feeling.”

“I cannot stop thinking about it.”

“About what?”

“You know.”

“But it is more fun to hear you say it.”

“*Kissing you*,” she breathed.

Lee touched her face because he was afraid that if he touched her body he would not be able to stop himself from laying her back on the chaise and taking more. He wanted her so badly. So instead he made love to her mouth – stroking her cheeks with his thumbs while his tongue traced the outline of her soft red lips and then plunged into the depths of her sweet mouth. She tasted of tea and honey. He felt her soften beneath his touch, her body leaning into his, and soft, low sounds emanating through her.

Maybe he could touch her shoulders and neck. Slowly accustom her to his touch and convince her that what awaited them in the marriage bed was nothing short of magnificent oblivion.

His hands had just begun to slide downward when a sharp *knock* came from the door. They both pulled back, their chests moving in heavy breaths. Lee looked regretful. He was tempted to ignore the knock at the door and continue their exploration –

Knock! Knock! It came again, more persistent this time.

Lee made a guttural sound of annoyance. Arie could not help but chuckle.

“Yes?” She called, a smile tugging up on the corner of her lips.

The Warsham’s butler opened the door hesitantly, poking his head in. “Ah, Lord and Lady Bayfield. I am sorry to disrupt you.”

Arie and Lee exchanged glances like two children who had been caught doing something naughty. Lee very much wished they had been. He sighed. “What is it?”

“The marquess would like to invite you to his study to discuss the upcoming parliamentary session, along with the Earl of Willingham,” Michaelson explained, his hands folded politely behind his back. But the look on his face said he was not fooled by the viscount and viscountess’ now chaste manners.

“Now?” The irritation in Lee’s voice was palpable. Arie thought it was a compliment that *she* was the one who could finally rattle the unflappable viscount’s usually impeccable manners.

“Yes, my lord.”

Lee was torn. Henry was a formidable power within the House of Lords, deeply involved in politics and a man always worth talking to. But for the first time since their wedding, he had his wife excited and willing.

Arie could see the indecision in his face. She took his hand and boldly pressed a kiss to his knuckles. She felt him pushing down a groan. She'd meant it as a comforting endearment, but she could see that she had only managed to inflame him more. “I haven't anything else going on this afternoon. I can wait for you.”

“My lady, I have an invitation for you as well.”

“Of course you do,” Lee said sharply.

The butler kindly ignored Lee's tone. “Lady Clydon has asked that you join her in her private sitting room. It is in the marchioness' apartments. I would be pleased to guide you there, Lady Bayfield.”

“That is very kind,” Arie acknowledged. She met Lee's eyes. The intensity she found there almost changed her mind. More and more she was finding that she *wanted* to be close to her husband; to touch and be touched by him. It was exhilarating and terrifying in equal measures.

Lee cleared his throat, resigning himself to an afternoon spent discussing politics rather than in his wife's arms. Using the hand she still held, he drew her closer to him and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “We will continue this later,” he breathed into her ear.

His warm breath sent a shiver of anticipation down Arie's spine as she watched him leave. She stared after him, her gaze heavy with emotion and oblivious to the butler who still stood waiting for her.

“Ahem, I can show you the way now if you are ready, my lady.”

Arie shook herself back into the moment. “Yes, please do.”

She paused in the doorway and glanced back around the sitting room. Her book was on the low table in front of the chaise. The pillow and blankets that Lee had been using to make up his makeshift bed were folded neatly atop a chest of drawers against the wall. Through two open doors was the bedroom with its perfectly made bed, silky coverlet, and soft pillows. Arie could not keep him from her bed forever. Nor did she want to. She swallowed hard and closed the door behind her.

“She was making eyes at Christopher! What is that young woman thinking?”

“She is just a silly girl – Arie! I am so glad you're able to join us.” Madison stood up and touched cheeks with Arie, drawing her into the room. It was comfortably furnished with pale green and gold furniture and muted earth tones. Meera was lounging on a chaise, her feet propped up on a pillow while Kelly sat more demurely in a wingback

chair with an embroidery hoop in her lap. Madison motioned for Arie to join them and retrieved the teacup she had been sipping from when Arie entered.

"I thought you might be otherwise occupied, being a newlywed." Madison winked. Arie blushed. "But then Henry mentioned he was going to invite Lee and Theo to talk about parliamentary issues and I thought you might like some company. We were just discussing the young Miss Wilks."

Arie pursed her lips instantly, her nose wrinkling as if she smelt something unpleasant.

"My thoughts exactly," Meera agreed. "The innuendos she made to Christopher ... well, I don't blush at much these days. But it is not at all proper for a young woman to speak to a married man in such a way."

"Because propriety is always your main concern?" Madison asked pointedly. Meera just grinned. "I hate to gossip about a guest in my home, but perhaps I ought to have a word with her mother. It would be a shame for her to go into her debut season with rumors already flowing."

"We wouldn't want her making a mockery of all those chaste little swans being presented at court," Meera said wryly.

"She does need to learn to swim with the current, rather than against it. At least when it is prudent to do so," Madison agreed.

"How much more harm can she do?" Arie poured herself a cup of tea with honey and relaxed into the opposite end of the sofa where Madison sat. She smiled despite herself, recalling her own presentation at court alongside Madison. She could remember the faces of all the young women crowded into the room together, waiting for their summons. Seven perfectly chaste white swans, as Meera had so aptly called them.

Putting aside the memory, Arie returned to the conversation at hand. "Nearly all of the men here are married. Except for Mr. Thornton. Though he was quite ... persistent with his attentions to me."

Madison shook her head. "I was afraid Henry was going to have to speak with him. But then you and Lee so conveniently solved that problem."

Even Kelly, quietly at work on her embroidery, chuckled at that.

Madison refilled her teacup and stirred it thoughtfully as she considered Arie. "How do you find marriage, Arie?"

Arie sipped her tea to give herself time to respond. "It is fine," she said, her voice sounding strangled.

"Just ... fine?" Madison wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

"Yes, completely fine." Another long sip of tea. Arie nearly burnt

her tongue.

“Really?”

“Leave her alone, Maddie,” Meera interjected from behind her closed eyes. She looked like she was attempting to drift off to sleep as she reclined on the chaise.

Madison narrowed her eyes at Meera but did not say anything. “I remember how confusing those first few days and weeks of marriage can be. Arie, if there is anything you want to ask or discuss – you may always talk to me.”

“As long as you give her all the steamy details,” Meera interjected. Madison tossed a pillow at her sister’s face.

“Well,” Arie sighed awkwardly, “there isn’t much to tell just yet.”

Meera sat up, giving up any pretense of disinterest.

“What do you mean?” Madison asked, her hand frozen in place over her teacup.

“... we haven’t actually ... consummated the marriage yet.”

Arie would very much have liked to disappear into the sofa cushions at that particular moment. She glanced around at the three other women. Kelly’s mouth formed a little ‘o’ of surprise. Meera looked like she was trying very hard not to laugh, while Madison had blinked several times in rapid succession.

Meera was the one who finally broke the awkward silence. “Huh. I would have thought after all these years of near sainthood, Lee would have been very ready to clamber into bed.”

Madison rolled her eyes at her younger sister. “As usual, Meera, you contribute so much.”

Arie tucked back one of her dark blonde curls behind her ear. The fashion was to wear a few ringlets hanging from either temple, but to Arie, it felt like she constantly had a fly buzzing around her periphery.

“I think that is perfectly reasonable, Arie. You hardly know one another and you married so quickly. These things take time,” Kelly chimed in, smiling kindly.

“Do they? Christopher and I could barely –”

“No one is looking to you and Christopher as an example of decorum or good sense,” Madison interjected. She ignored her sister’s offended gasp and turned back to Arie. “You are attracted to one another. Anyone with eyes can see that.”

“I suppose so ...” Arie allowed.

“I think everyone in residence at Carcliffe Castle had noticed the way you two were going on, and that was *before* you were compromised.”

“And whose doing is that? You were quite determined to throw Lee and me together from the start.” Arie glowered at her friend.

Madison didn’t flinch. Her eyes twinkled rather mischievously. “I

thought you might suit.”

“Oh, Maddie.”

“You really cannot stay out of –”

“I only want what is best for those I care for –”

Arie cleared her throat – a disturbing habit she had already picked up from her husband – drawing the other three women’s eyes back to her.

“I wanted a love match.” All of their eyes were glued to her now. “Ever since I watched Henry and Maddie fall in love and I saw how marriage could truly be, I have wanted no less for myself. It is why I have remained a spinster for all of these years.”

“You are not a spinster –” The words faded from Madison’s lips at her friend’s expression. She folded her hands politely in her lap and waited for Arie to continue.

“But now I am married. Lee is a perfectly kind and respectable man. I do consider myself lucky, but ...”

“...but it is not what you wanted,” Kelly finished for her. Arie was a bit surprised. The Countess of Willingham was the quietest among the bunch. But she gave Arie a knowing smile.

“When I went to London to find Theo, he wanted nothing to do with marriage. I had to practically drag him down the aisle. It was not ...” Kelly paused, her delicate dark brows furrowing as she searched for the words. “It was not how I had envisioned courtship or marriage. But we are very happy – now. And I love him so much sometimes that it almost hurts.”

Kelly flushed pink at her own words, glancing around in embarrassment. But Meera and Madison were both nodding in understanding, their own eyes misty.

“Has Lee ... made advances?” Meera asked. Of the women assembled, Meera probably knew Lee the best. Having been practically engaged to Christopher from her youth, she had been a frequent guest in the Bowden household.

Arie nodded, trying unsuccessfully to hold her blush at bay.

“And you have responded by ...?”

“Asking him to sleep on the chaise in the sitting room.”

Meera burst out laughing, no longer able to contain her mirth. Madison was biting her lip so hard it was white. Only Kelly looked truly circumspect.

“You haven’t shared a bed ... even to sleep?” Meera asked between gasps of breath, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes.

Arie shook her head.

Madison did her best to ignore her sister. “Perhaps you should start there. Invite him to sleep in bed with you ... and see how things progress,” Madison suggested. “Of course, only if you are ready,” she

added hastily.

"I think I am. Lee is so terribly ..."

"Kind?"

"Handsome?"

"Thoughtful?"

Arie giggled. "All of those things. I do like him very much. I just ... I have to let go of my expectations."

Madison reached over and grasped Arie's hand. "I do not think he will disappoint you."

Arie nodded slowly, drawing confidence from the three women's encouraging smiles. "Alright. I will do it."



"I CAN ONLY SPEAK FOR the sentiment in Devonshire, but even if you can get such a thing through the House of Lords, I cannot imagine it succeeding in the Commons." Lee had just finished reading the position piece written by one of their peers. Henry had been quietly circulating it to others with whom he was politically aligned, trying to get a sense of the other noblemen's thoughts on the matter. Lee shook his head and passed the packet back to Henry.

Henry looked disappointed, but he took it well. "What do you think, Theo?"

The Earl of Willingham uncrossed his legs and sat up straighter before he spoke. "It's a worthy cause, Henry. It may not be well received, but there is no one as adept at massaging the levers of politics as you. If it comes to a vote you will have my support."

Henry smiled genuinely. "Thank you, my friend." Then he turned. "Lee?"

"Let me discuss it further with my agent. Talk to some of the locals in the county. I am not opposed," Lee said judiciously.

"That is fair," Henry agreed.

"Now that is settled, we drink," Christopher said from across the room where he was already filling glasses of whiskey from Henry's decanter.

"Help yourself, Christopher," Henry said drily. The two men had a tenuous relationship at best. Before Henry's marriage to Madison – who was one of Christopher's closest friends – they could hardly stand to be in a room together. It had taken years of acquaintance and work on the part of their wives, but now the brothers-in-law were mostly civil. And with the dilution of Lee and Theo added to the room they could essentially get along. Although, once upon a time Christopher had also made overtures to Theo's now-wife Kelly as well. It was a wonder his brother was even allowed in polite society, Lee thought as he watched Christopher pour the drinks.

Lee accepted the whiskey. He took an exploratory sip, then a larger gulp, then he finished the dram. When he looked up, the three other men were staring at him.

"You alright there, Lee?" Christopher asked, refilling his brother's drink. "Usually it takes you all night to put away a pour of spirits."

"I'm fine," Lee took another swig, savoring the way it burned in his throat.

"Ah, the words of a happily married man," Christopher goaded.

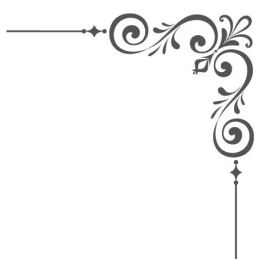
"I am happy to be married. I would be happier if things were ... never mind." Lee shook his head. He would not discuss Arie with anyone, even his friends or brother. Not only did it seem rude, but it seemed like a betrayal of her confidence in him – her vulnerability.

Theo, Christopher, and Henry exchanged looks but did not push him further. Instead, Henry raised his glass in a toast.

"To a happy marriage," Henry said. "When you find it, it is a gift. On the way there, well, ... we drink."

"I'll drink to that."

"Amen."



Chapter 13

By that evening Arie's confidence had evaporated. She barely heard a word anyone said at the evening meal. Henry had organized a chess tournament for the evening's entertainment as they ticked away the hours until the new year. While Arie usually considered herself a more than adequate strategist, her mind was so preoccupied that she was eliminated in the first round in a solid defeat by Theo.

Lee sensed immediately that something was amiss. In only two days of marriage, he was already quite proficient at reading Arie's mood. She was skittish and unsettled all evening. Theo was not a good chess player and yet Arie lost to him with the simplest of gambits. Instead of watching the others still at play, she retreated to a corner of the library alone.

Lee won his match – Mrs. Wilks was not much of an opponent – and had extra time while the more evenly matched pairs played.

"Are you alright?" He handed her a glass of sherry as he sat down opposite her.

Arie smiled slightly. "Thank you," she murmured as she accepted the glass.

"Did you sleep well enough last night?" He asked when she did not respond to his initial query.

Her eyes widened like an animal caught in a hunter's line of sight.

"I ... I slept fine," she stammered, gulping her sherry.

Lee studied her closely. She gripped her glass so tightly that her knuckles were white. Her dark blonde curls were tucked back, leaving her face in a stark silhouette. She looked ... worried.

Tentatively, Lee reached out and covered her hand with his. "We do not have to stay up until midnight. If you would rather retire now –"

"No!"

Arie forced herself to calm her voice. "No, I would like to stay and watch."

"Alright," Lee nodded, withdrawing his hand.

"Alright." Arie stood up so quickly her sherry sloshed out of the glass, but she did not pause.

Lee watched her go with a tightening feeling in the pit of his stomach. *What had he done wrong now?*

Arie felt bad as she walked away. They had left things so well this afternoon, with the promise of more hanging sweetly in the air. But despite her declarations in Madison's private salon earlier in the day, when Lee offered himself to her again she had thrown up a wall of defense.

When had she become so shut off? She had always told herself that she was waiting for the right gentleman to come along and win her heart. She'd felt certain that when that moment came she would recognize it immediately, be able to let her guard down, and they would live happily ever after. *Damn it all* – it was so much more complicated than that!

Lee was just as her friends had said: kind, thoughtful, handsome. And each day she spent with him she could feel her feelings for him growing. She was not yet ready to put a name to them ... but he was not just any other man. And perhaps it was time she stopped pretending that just because they had been forced to marry there was nothing special between them.

Theo and Lee faced off in the next round of chess games. Arie stood at Lee's shoulder, her arms clasped tightly in front of her. She watched the game being played and realized right off that Lee was the superior player. She was a bit ashamed that she had lost to Theo; although he was a sharp man, chess was clearly not a skill he practiced regularly. Lee beat him handily.

When they finished their game, it was nearing eleven o'clock in the evening and there were just four competitors left: Lee, Leonora, Drake, and Meera.

Meera sat before a freshly reset chessboard looking very pleased with herself. "Alright, who is going to challenge me next? Lee?"

"I would relish the opportunity to knock my dear sister out of the competition," Leonora said cheekily, taking the seat opposite her youngest sister before anyone could protest. The group of those actively watching cheered – both women were spirited and clever; it would be an interesting matchup.

That left Lee and Drake. Arie felt uneasy, though she could not pinpoint why she felt so unsettled. Drake had been distantly polite to her ever since her engagement and subsequent marriage to Lee – a complete reversal from his earlier simpering. But she had gotten the distinct feeling from Lee that he did not like Drake and that those feelings were quite pronounced.

Drake sat down before the newly arranged chessboard and crossed one booted foot over his opposite knee. He looked directly at Lee, eyebrows raised. His eyes spoke of challenge.

Lee moved to sit down but Arie caught his arm. He paused, looking at her questioningly.

“Let’s go up to bed.”

Lee felt lightheaded – somewhere between being dead drunk and hit over the head with a heavy object. “What?”

“You said we did not have to stay up. Let’s go to bed,” Arie said quickly. She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. “Please?” She murmured so only he could hear.

Lee had no notion what was going through Arie’s head, but there was no way that he was going to refuse her. He slid his hand around her waist, relishing the way she leaned into him as he did so. Their eyes met, locking together and saying more than words ever could. Arie’s breath was coming fast and her chest was rising and falling rapidly. Lee squeezed her tighter still before turning his head towards the open seat and table.

“I forfeit,” he said simply.

Drake looked like he’d been poleaxed. “You cannot –”

“My wife is tired,” Lee said without pretense. He nodded politely to Henry, who looked surprised but whose own grin was growing by the second, and to Madison, who was practically glowing with approval. “Please excuse us, Lord and Lady Clydon.”

“Of course!” Madison waved her hand dismissively but it was merely a formality. Lee had already started guiding Arie out of the room.

They walked the familiar path to their suite. Had it been just a week prior that he had gotten lost on the way and stumbled across this angel?

Lee opened the door to the suite and held it open for Arie. She laid aside the shawl she’d brought with her, draping it over the back of one of the chairs that faced the fireplace in the sitting room. Lee closed the door quietly behind him and then leaned back against it, considering his wife carefully.

“You can tell me what is wrong,” Lee finally said.

Arie ran her hand back and forth over the polished wood of the chairback several times. “Nothing is wrong. You make me so nervous, Lee.”

He’d heard his given name from her lips only a handful of times. Her voice was lower than most women’s – a silky tone made for darkened bedrooms. He had never heard it said with quite the same cadence.

“Is nervous good or bad?”

“I wish I knew.” She tossed her hands up in exasperation.

“I think it is good.” His voice was husky.

Arie paused, her fingertips touching her lips. She had no idea how alluring she was, of that Lee was quite certain.

“Good?”

“Yes. Nervous we can work with. Indifferent is hard to overcome. You cannot make someone feel what is not there. Afraid is not insurmountable but I hope I would never give you cause to be afraid of me.” Lee chuckled at the expression on her face. “But nervous ... I would expect a young bride to be nervous.”

“*Young* is being a bit generous.”

“Younger than me, then,” he amended.

Arie tapped her fingers against her lips three times as she pondered his words. “I would like to invite you to bed.”

Her eyes widened instantly as she heard the phrase come out of her mouth. Lee did not think he had ever felt his cock harden so quickly in his entire life. But the look on her face had him groaning internally.

“To sleep!” Arie cried. “I would like to invite you to sleep in the bed with me rather than on the chaise!”

Lee cleared his throat – it came out as more of a strangled sound somewhere between a laugh, a cough, and a yelp. “That is the most confusingly appealing offer I have ever received.”

“You have been so patient with me. I am sorry–”

He shook his head, catching her hand before it tapped her lips again. “You don’t have to apologize or explain yourself. We can ... continue your lessons.” There seemed to be nothing he could do about the strangled sound of his voice.

“Alright. Well, if you will ring for a maid to help me undress ...” she trailed off when Lee shook his head.

“Let me.” *Damn, where had his good sense gotten to?* Not only had he agreed to share her bed but not bed her, now he was suggesting that he help her undress? Touch her luminous pale skin, breathe in the scent of her as her petticoats fell away, and keep his hands to himself?

Arie was quivering with nervousness, but she nodded her head. “Alright,” she said again.

Lee offered his hand and led her through the open double doors of the sitting room into the bedroom. The bed had never looked so ominous. Arie turned away from it instinctively. Lee took this as an invitation. His fingers went to the base of her neck where her dress was fastened. His fingertips grazed her skin and she jumped like an animal touched with a branding iron.

“Are you sure?” Lee asked, praying that if she said ‘no’ he would have the fortitude to turn away.

“Yes.” Arie nodded and stepped back into place. “I was just surprised. Please go ahead.”

She forced herself to stand still as Lee brought his hands back to the nape of her neck and carefully began unbuttoning the gown she wore. The shimmery gray-gold iridescent taffeta she’d chosen for the

occasion of New Year's complimented both the dark gold of her hair and the gray pools of her eyes. His hands were warm against her always cool skin.

He reached the last hook, unfastened it, and then paused. Arie shrugged her shoulders a little bit and the gown started to fall away. She felt Lee's hands skim over her bare shoulders as he helped the garment along. Then it was nothing more than a pool at her feet and she stood before him in just her undergarments.

Slowly, she turned around to face him and bravely met his eyes. Lee stroked one finger down her cheek and brought her face up to his. He brushed the softest of kisses against her lips. "Beautiful," he murmured.

He felt her skin heat as she blushed. "My turn," he said in jest, trying to make her feel more comfortable. He shrugged off his tailcoat, unbuttoned his waistcoat, and tossed the two garments aside so that he stood before her in just his breeches and his shirt.

Arie reached up tentatively, her hand quivering the whole way, and caught the button at his throat. She undid it carefully, then the next and the next until a triangle of skin and a smattering of curly dark chest hair were visible.

Her breath was coming fast and heavy, her chest moving mightily against the constraints of her chemise and corset. Lee was painfully aware of the way her breasts pushed for freedom – the same way that he was hardening and pushing against his breeches.

He swallowed hard and took a step back. He did not trust himself to continue undressing her. It was exquisite torture and he was afraid that if he continued, he would be unable to stop himself. And more than he wanted to make love to her, he wanted to respect her wishes.

"Perhaps we should finish changing into our nightclothes ourselves."

Arie nodded hastily in agreement. She did not say a word but disappeared behind the screen to finish undressing. Her heart was beating so hard in her chest she thought it might explode right out of her. She'd wanted him to keep going – to touch her with his hands the way he touched her with his eyes. And that thought scared her more than anything.

She unlaced her corset – thankfully it laced up the front – removed her petticoat and chemise and pulled on her night rail. It was not the most modest, tying just above her breasts rather than at her throat. She pulled it up as high as she could, trying to force her ample breasts down. Lee was being more than considerate; she did not need to inflame him more.

When Arie emerged from behind the three-paneled screen Lee was already in bed. He'd put on a nightshirt – or was it the same shirt? –

either way, it showed the same tantalizing triangle of his chest. But thankfully the rest of him was already beneath the sheets and coverlet.

Arie blew out the last few candles and slid into bed next to him. She lay awkwardly reclined against the pillows for several painfully long moments, too nervous to move or even to think.

"I won't bite ... or anything else. I promise." Lee's voice floated across the dark air between them.

Slowly, Arie scooted closer across the bed. Her leg touched Lee's first, her soft skin rubbing against his coarser and hairier one. But she kept her determination in place and moved closer. Lee extended his arm and gathered her into it. In an extraordinary moment of rightness, her head found its place in the curve of his shoulder and his fingertips laced through hers. They both relaxed, overcome by the way their bodies seemed to fit together like puzzle pieces.

They were both just starting to drift off to sleep when the clocks throughout Carcliffe Castle chimed midnight. The clock on the mantle in the sitting room clamored in unison with the grandfather clock in the hallway in a cacophony. Arie jerked to attention, surprised by the sudden sounds. Lee tightened his grip on her. The feeling of warmth, comfort, and home washed over her and she relaxed back into his arms.

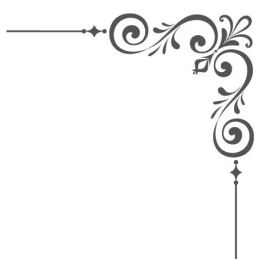
Her eyes slowly started to close as the strains of '*Auld Lang Syne*' drifted up from the group of guests still reveling below. There was no way they should have been able to hear the merriment through the thick walls and floors of the castle, and yet Lee could make out every word as it was sung in a disharmonious chorus.

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to the top of Arie's head. She did not move at all, already fast asleep in his arms.

"I love you," he said softly into the night.



*On the eighth day of Christmas my true love sent to me
Eight maids a milking ...*



Chapter 14

January 1st, 1816

When he took her hand, Arie did not flinch or jump. The same rush of heat flooded her body, but she might finally be getting used to the sensation rather than overwhelmed by it. She even managed to keep the smile on her face and nod her head along to Leonora's conversation when he put his hand on the small of her back. But when he started stroking up and down her spine and just down to where the curve of her bottom began ... well, she gasped quite noticeably.

"Are you alright, dear?" Leonora asked, concern on her face.

It took a concerted effort for Arie not to dart a look at Lee. But she somehow kept her eyes trained on Leonora instead. "Yes, just a draft that caught me by surprise."

Leonora glanced at Lee, whose face was overly blank, and a knowing smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "A draft, yes, I'm sure," was all she said before turning to allow her husband to help her into the sleigh.

"There are people all around us!" Arie hissed as the sleigh pulled away.

"Not for long." Lee grinned devilishly.

Before she could respond to that, their sleigh slid into place in front of them. Lee offered her his hand and she could do nothing but climb up. There were still several groups of guests waiting for their conveyances behind them.

Today's entertainment was sleigh rides through the snow. Madison and Henry must have paid a small fortune to buy, rent, and borrow enough sleighs to accommodate all of the guests at once. One by one, the sleighs pulled up to Carcliffe Castle and welcomed one little family or couple after another. The marchioness had even seen each sleigh outfitted with thick blankets. As Lee and Arie settled in, the driver directed the horses onto the same pre-planned route as the other sleighs.

Arie was wrapped in her thickest fur-lined pelisse, gloves on her hands, thick woolen stockings, and leather boots. The blankets heaped upon their laps were heavy knit wool. But she still found herself moving into Lee seeking his warmth.

Lee welcomed her. In his opinion, Madison could not have

arranged a more perfect outing. An hour spent alone with Arie, with no interruptions, where close quarters were not just encouraged but practically required ... he could not have dreamed up something so idyllic.

The night before had been the most sensuous and also most torturous of his life. Holding Arie in his arms all night had been like a dream. Every time he woke in the night to find her still there, warm and soft against him, he'd poked himself to make sure he was truly awake.

But that morning he'd woke with a painfully hard erection and absolutely no way to do a thing about it.

"Do you think this is considered the equivalent of a drive through Hyde Park?"

Lee blinked twice, a blank look on his face. He had no idea what she was talking about.

Arie did not bother restraining her laughter. "This," she motioned at the sleigh they rode in and the array of others ahead of and behind them. "Do you think this is the winter equivalent of a drive through Hyde Park?"

Lee looked at the carriages ahead of them, already spreading out over the snowy landscape, and said quite honestly: "I would not know. I have never taken a drive through Hyde Park. With a young woman," he clarified.

"Of course you haven't," Arie laughed. "I have taken many a ride through the Hyde Park. And Regents' Park. It is one of the few times a young woman is allowed to be alone with a man because they are in an open carriage and on public display the entire time."

"We are in an open ... conveyance. But I do not know if this qualifies as a public display. I don't think I could get Leonora and Edmund's attention even if I yelled." He nodded towards the nearest sleigh in front of them.

"The primary idea is that such an outing allows the couple to get to know one another better, but the young lady's virtue is not in any danger. So I do think this would qualify."

A new glint entered Lee's eyes, turned a shining blue by the bright white snowy contrast all around them. "You think your virtue cannot be put in danger here in this sleigh?"

Arie's breath caught in her throat. Her gaze darted to the driver of the sleigh, perched several feet away on the bench seat. She doubted he could hear them over the steady beating of the horses' hooves. "Well, I think so. We are not alone, after all."

Lee glanced at the driver for a moment but then brought his eyes back to hers. "These blankets provide a lot of cover."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Cover for what?"

"Is it time for another lesson?"

"Lee, you cannot be serious. The driver is right there –"

"And he cannot see us nor hear a thing." Stifling further misgivings, he caught her chin with his gloved hand and covered her mouth with his. Her protests faded as she gave herself up to the intensity of his kiss.

Beneath the blankets, their hands were clasped. But that did not last for long. Lee's hand freed itself from hers and drifted down her leg to her knee. It stayed there for a while, stroking back and forth through her gown while he kissed her. He may not have been with many women, but he certainly knew what he was doing. And that was setting her aflame.

Lee slid his hand up her leg again but this time instead of keeping it on the top of her leg he caressed the inside of her thigh. Arie inhaled sharply, breaking their kiss. His eyes were ready to meet hers. He looked directly at her as he gently grazed his fingers over the warm apex between her legs. Arie felt a rush of heat and wetness she did not understand. She pushed her hips forward, reaching for his touch. All the while, their eyes were locked tightly. Lee stroked his fingers over her again more firmly, though still through all the layers of gown and chemise.

She wanted more. That was Arie's only coherent thought. She knew that a man's ... shaft would enter her there. But she'd never imagined his hands touching her. Or that she would *want* him to.

Lee started to bring his hand up to stroke her face, but she caught it in her own. Her eyes still fastened on his, she pressed his fingertips to her lips. Then she slid his hand back below the blankets.

Open-mouthed with surprise, Lee nonetheless accepted her invitation readily. Wetting his lips with a feral hunger, he slid his hand down her stomach. He paused to unfasten the bottom few buttons of her pelisse and spread them apart to give him better access to her body. He considered rucking up her skirt so he could have full access ... but he was worried that if he broke contact with her she might change her mind. And he desperately wanted to show her the pleasures that awaited them.

His touch started soft. Feather-light, he stroked her through the fabric of gown and chemise. She was wearing muslin. It was soft as butter but thin. He could feel the heat of her center even through the layers. And the way she was starting to quiver ...

He intensified his touch, so his fingers moved more firmly against her mound, but in a constant motion like he was playing the pianoforte. She gasped. He had found her sensitive burning button, even through the layers. *Lord, what sounds would she make when there was nothing between them but desire?*

Unable to keep himself from her a moment longer, he brought his lips down to hers in a smothering kiss. He plunged his tongue into her hot, honey-scented mouth while his fingers stroked firmly and rhythmically. She whimpered against him.

Lee pulled himself away, panting rapidly as cold air rushed into his lungs. Arie's lips were bright red from the passion of their kiss. And she was breathing even faster than he.

She swallowed hard. "I must concede defeat."

For the second time in the last half hour, Lee stared at her in blank confusion.

"My virtue is quite in tatters." But she looked quite pleased by that fact.

Lee scoffed which turned into throat-clearing paired with an exasperated sigh. He put his arm around her and drew her tightly against him. "Minx," he said softly into her hair as he pressed a kiss to the top of her head. Arie just smiled and snuggled in closer to him.

The sleigh had taken them much further than they'd walked on either of their forays into the snow. The estate on which Carcliffe Castle sat seemed to go on for miles. Truly, it was composed of many smaller tenancies. As the sleighs slid over the hills and around stands of trees, they also passed picturesque cottages with boughs of greenery over the doorways and smoke billowing cozily from the chimneys. It was a magical ride. Despite all of her misgivings and her torrent of emotions the past few days ... she was happy.

There was a sudden *lurch* followed quickly by "whoa" and other words of communication between the driver and his team. Arie and Lee both sat up as the sleigh slowly came to a stop.

The driver turned around on the seat and motioned for them to stay put while he jumped down. He trudged through the snow and started examining the horse on the right. Arie knew very little about horses, but Lee recognized what was wrong as soon as he saw the driver lift the horse's hind leg.

"He's thrown a shoe," the driver confirmed.

Lee was already standing up and looking around. "There's a barn about fifty yards on. I can see it just over the hill." He jumped down, squishing into the snow below.

He held his hand out to help Arie down, who was looking at him questioningly. "We should unhitch the horse and walk him to the barn. We don't want to risk injuring him. He'll be off-footed with that missing shoe."

She nodded understanding, accepting his hand down. The snow crunched beneath her boots. If there truly was a barn only fifty yards down the way, she might manage to remain dry-footed. Especially if she walked on the compacted snow from all the sleighs that had taken

the path before them.

“We can hail down the next group that passes,” Arie said helpfully, taking Lee’s arm and starting down the road. Without their weight, the singular horse pulled the sleigh easily while the driver walked them carefully along.

Thankfully, the barn appeared over the next rise. It was situated next to a small farmhouse, a neat row of snow-covered trees lining the path between here and there. As they neared the buildings, Arie turned back to the driver. “Do you know who lives here?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Fink and their daughters, my lady. They are dairy farmers. I expect the barn will be full of cows.”

“This is turning into quite the adventure,” Arie said with a chuckle. They approached the door of the cottage. Lee rapped firmly on the door.

There was the sound of movement from inside and then the door opened. At first, they thought it had done so of its own accord. Maybe the magic and mystery of the castle expanded to the ancillary buildings as well. Then there was a little squeak, drawing their eyes downward.

A little girl, perhaps four or five years old, held open the heavy door. Before either of them could speak, several more heads appeared above hers in rapid succession. All young girls.

Lee was surprised into silence, Arie couldn’t help laughing. “You are the daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Fink, I presume? I did not realize there were so many of you.” Arie glanced over her shoulder at the driver who waited back on the road with the sleigh and horses.

“Eight,” one of the middle floating heads provided helpfully.

“Eight daughters?”

“Eight hellions!” A voice boomed from inside the house. The floating heads disappeared – there had not been eight, so there must be more daughters within – and a pleasantly rounded, maternal-looking woman appeared.

“Mrs. Fink?” Arie asked.

“Indeed, mistress. And how may we help you? Are you a guest up at the Castle? Have you lost your way?”

“Not exactly. Our horse has ... thrown a shoe?” Arie glanced at Lee to make sure she’d described it right.

“Yes,” Lee confirmed. “We were hoping to stable the animal in your barn until we can get things in order.”

“Of course, of course! We were just about to head out to the milking, as it were. We’ll help you see the animal settled.” Mrs. Fink opened the door and waved her hand.

Like magic, a line of young misses started marching out garbed in an assortment of winter shawls, boots, and cloaks. Arie could not help

grinning as she watched the procession. Last of all was Mr. Fink – a rather placid-looking man who tipped his hat to them as he followed his daughters and wife outside. It was clear who ran this particular household.

Arie tilted her head towards Lee's. "It's marvelous," she whispered.

"Don't tell me you want eight daughters." He looked suddenly quite frightened.

She was tempted to say 'yes' just to enjoy the look on his face. Instead, she slid her arm back through his – *there was the customary leap of heart and stomach in unison* – and followed the group along the tramped down path between house and barn.

The first Fink daughter to reach the barn threw open the doors and the others followed them in. It was indeed a dairy barn filled with cows. It was a large operation – two separate aisles, with a row of pens on each side.

"There's space for your horse at the end of the aisle there," Mrs. Fink called. Lee looked over his shoulder to make sure the driver heard her. The man nodded, leading the injured horse down the aisle she'd indicated.

Arie and Lee strode down the second aisle, observing as the Fink girls went to work. Arie had never seen such a scene. Lee had some experience on farms, as several served his estate back in Devonshire, but it was still novel to see the industrious young ladies at work.

Turning to Lee, Arie asked: "Do you – my goodness! Miss Wilks! Mr. Thornton!"

Lee wished they could just turn away and forget what was in front of them. But then he felt the movement of several young women appearing behind them.

"Who is that?"

"Why is her gown pulled down? Is it ripped?"

"Mama is an excellent seamstress."

"I think I saw him up at the old castle."

"Ooooh, Mama is not going to like this."

Mrs. Fink arrived on the scene and she did not like what she found one bit. "What on God's green earth is happening here?"

In the intervening moments since their discovery, Susan had the good sense to pull her gown back up over her shoulder. But there was not much she could do about the redness of her recently-kissed lips or the mess of her straw-filled hair. For his part, Drake looked quite circumspect. His eyes had not left the ground.

Arie was shaking her head over and over again. It had been consensual. Knowing what she did – what she'd learned over the past few days about amorous embraces – Susan had been a willing participant. Arie said a quick prayer of thanks for that.

Suddenly, the barn doors burst open again and in swept the marquess and marchioness themselves, arm in arm.

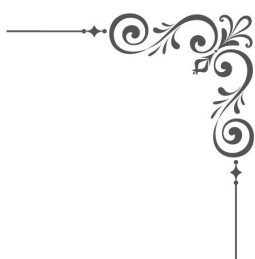
“We saw your sleigh by the roadside and thought something must be amiss. I am so glad you are both alright,” Madison was saying as they came down the aisle. Then their eyes landed on the scene before them. Her mouth dropped open.

“God’s teeth,” Henry cursed under his breath. “Well, I suppose this accounts for Drake’s mysterious absences the past few days,” he said quietly to his wife, though Arie and Lee were just close enough to hear.

Madison swallowed visibly and then nodded regally. “It appears we shall be having another wedding.”



*On the ninth day of Christmas my true love sent to me
Nine drummers drumming ...*



Chapter 15

January 2nd, 1816

Arie awoke for the second day in a row in Lee's arms. She felt warm, safe, and dare she even think it ... loved? She was afraid to move, for if she did then Lee might wake and the moment would be lost. And it was just too sweet for her to let go.

Would the rest of her life be filled with mornings like this? Sweet and warm, comforting bliss? Or was this paradise reserved for newlyweds? She ought to ask Madison. Arie felt her cheeks heating just at the thought of asking Madison such a personal question. But she'd seen the way that Madison and Henry looked at one another when they thought no one else was looking ... the same way that Theo and Kelly and Christopher and Meera did ... so perhaps this was not just a phase. Perhaps it was something ... more.

She felt movement on her arm. Her eyes flitted open and she saw that Lee's fingertips were slowly stroking the tender flesh on the underside of her elbow. It was a gentle touch, so light that it was barely there. And yet, Arie's fingers curled around the bedsheet.

She was nestled in his shoulder, her head against his chest and his muscular arm curled around her body. His fingers slowly migrated from her inner arm to her stomach. The bedsheet had slipped down in the night, leaving her thin nightgown as the only barrier between his skin and hers. As his fingers moved towards her navel, she breathed in sharply. Neither of them was under any pretense of slumber.

But his hand did not linger over her navel. It traced a path upwards to her belly button, where it drew a sensuous circle, then it moved northward. This time, his finger traced a circle around her breast. Arie felt her nipples hardening – a strange contracting sensation that was surprisingly pleasurable. Then Lee flicked one finger across her nipple and she squeaked.

She felt rather than heard the chuckle in Lee's chest. He did not stop or slow his exploration. He followed the firmer flick with a gentle rubbing, then another flick, then a gentle rub. The contrast of sensations was intoxicating. To Arie's surprise, she made a high-pitched sound each time he touched her. She bit her lip and tried to hold the sounds in.

Suddenly, she felt Lee's other hand on her cheek. He stroked his

fingertips over her lips and then insistently urged them apart, running the tip of his index finger firmly over her bottom lip. "Let me hear you," he implored her huskily.

He chose that moment to cup her breast fully and squeeze, a bold action that elicited a long moan. She was hungry for his touch and he wanted nothing more than to oblige her. He lowered his other hand from her mouth so that he could cup both of her breasts simultaneously. She had beautifully full breasts, so round they filled his palms easily. He alternated strokes and squeezes until she was moaning loudly. She arched her back and turned her face up to his.

Lee met her lips in a melting kiss. This was it, he realized. The moment was finally here. The passion between them was building with such intensity it was nigh unstoppable. He cupped her bottom, annoyed to find the barrier of her nightgown still between them, and hastily slid it out of the way so he could touch her bare skin. Filling his hands with her, he guided her body atop of his. There was no hiding the rigidity of his cock, hard as a shaft of granite between them. But Arie was not put off. No, she was grinding against him instinctively with more ardor than more experienced women.

"Arie," he groaned, guiding her hips. He could have easily entered her then; her nightgown was high up on her waist, he wore nothing more than a nightshirt. Lee was envisioning sliding inside of her but ... he stopped himself.

Arie pulled away, looking at him in surprise. "What's wrong?" She asked, her voice deep and throaty.

"I want nothing between us."

Lee slid his hands upward and pulled the night rail up over her head, exposing her skin fully for the first time.

She was a goddess. Her dark gold hair curls fell in a riotous mess over her neck and shoulders. Her hair was so long, the tendrils tickled the edges of her dark pink nipples, standing firmly at attention. In the pale shafts of morning light that filtered in between the drawn curtains, her pale skin was luminous. "Arie," Lee said again, his voice almost shaking.

He loved her so much.

Unable to wait another moment, he pulled his hands from her and sat up just enough to get his nightshirt off. Arie's hands tugged at the shoulders, helping him get it off. She was as eager as he.

Then they were finally naked together. For just a moment, they were both paralyzed, staring at the other and taking in the person before them – chests heaving, nipples tight, anticipation fairly buzzing between them. Just as quickly, the moment ended and they came together like magnets. Mouths, chests, hands, skin touching in every place it could. Arie was shifting her hips, inviting him in without even

knowing it. Lee took hold of her hips to guide her down –

“Lord Bayfield?” *Knock knock*. “Are you awake?”

“Bloody hell and damnation,” Arie cursed. Lee did not know what surprised him more – the rapping at the door or the expletives flowing from his wife’s lovely mouth.

“Ignore them,” Lee said definitively, although Arie had already started to roll away. He moved on top of her, parting her legs with his knee and kissing her neck. She moaned. *Yes, ignoring whoever the hell was knocking on their door was absolutely the right decision.*

“Lee? Get your old bones out of bed and answer the door!”

Christopher chastised from behind the closed door.

Lee groaned again, though this time not from pleasure.

“Go away!” He yelled. Arie giggled against him, her breasts bouncing delectably. Lee decided to ignore his brother and lowered his mouth to one of those irresistible orbs, taking the dark rose-colored nipple between his lips and sucking greedily.

Arie yelped loudly, her hand flying to her mouth in embarrassment. Lee did not think that the sound was loud enough to carry through the bedroom, into the sitting room, and through the door to the corridor. He did not *think* so.

There were more muffled voices behind the door. “Lee, we require your help,” the marquess said more cordially – but also more authoritatively – through the door.

“What the devil –” It was Lee’s turn to swear.

Arie was still trembling, Lee’s mouth just inches from her nipple, but she managed to speak: “I think you had better answer them.”

The look of frustration on her husband’s handsome face was profound. He lowered his lips again to her breast, this time placing the lightest of kisses upon her nipple and then the other. “This is not finished,” he promised, rolling off her. She started to sit up in bed. “Stay there. I will be right back.”

Arie bit her lip to keep from laughing. But the look he gave her as he pulled on a pair of breeches wiped all giggles from her face. There was a sudden rush of heat and wetness between her legs. She swallowed hard and pulled the sheet around her.

Lee threw open the door with murder upon his face. “Someone better be dead.”

Christopher, Henry, and Michaelson stood in the hallway. Seeing the task of rousing Lord Bayfield accomplished, and the look upon said lord’s face, the butler murmured something incoherent and retreated. Henry and Christopher, however, came uninvited into the sitting room.

“Not quite,” Henry acknowledged. “But we do need your help on something particular.” The perfect gentleman, Henry kept his eyes

firmly on Lee and sat down on the chaise with his back to the bedroom beyond.

Christopher, meanwhile, tilted his head so he could see clearly through the partially open doors that separated the two rooms. He saw his new sister-in-law in the middle of the bed, wrapped in nothing but the bedsheet, and winked cheekily.

Lee was not amused. He walked to the door and closed it.

“And this could not wait until I came downstairs for breakfast?” Lee crossed his arms across his chest and did not sit down. He would not acknowledge this conversation.

“Actually, yes. We need your assistance obtaining a special license,” Henry said.

Lee raised his eyebrows but did not comment.

“Henry asked how you’d managed to acquire one so quickly for your wedding to Arie. I told him about the special relationship you have with the church,” Christopher explained with irritating helpfulness.

“I assisted the Archbishop in obtaining some church property that had gone amiss some years ago. It showed up for sale near Dartmouth, I recognized it, purchased it, and returned it to its rightful owner – the Church of England.” Lee was not in the mood to explain this particular anecdote.

“So you could say that the church owes you a debt of sorts?” Henry asked.

“It did. I leveraged that debt to obtain a special license from the Archbishop on essentially zero notice. I am sure that both sides consider the debt paid in full.” Unfortunately, despite that statement, Lee suspected where this conversation was leading.

“Miss Wilks and Mr. Thornton find themselves in need of a special license,” Henry said, confirming exactly what Lee had thought.

“Why don’t they have the banns read and get married in a month or two, like everyone else?” Lee ignored the fact that he and Arie had not wanted to do just that.

“Mr. Thornton must leave directly following Epiphany to return to the Continent on business matters,” Christopher interjected. He was enjoying his brother’s frustration.

“And Mr. and Mrs. Wilks do not exactly ...” Henry paused, trying to phrase the next part delicately.

“They don’t trust the braggart to come back,” Christopher finished. Henry gave him a look that was less than complimentary but turned back to Lee.

“That is more or less the measure of the situation. They would very much like this matter to be settled before Mr. Thornton departs the country. Since neither party are peers, they cannot appeal to the

Archbishop directly –”

“I suggested Gretna Green,” Christopher interrupted. Henry gritted his teeth. Lee rolled his eyes at his brother; he sensed Christopher was deliberately trying to – and succeeding at – irritating Henry.

“I was going to go myself to speak with the Archbishop on their behalf, but then Christopher mentioned your special circumstances. I thought we might combine our influence to get them the license.” Henry turned his body so that Christopher was no longer even in his periphery.

“And you want to leave immediately. Which is why you are in my rooms before the sun is even fully up.” Lee felt like kicking something. He could not very well say no to his host. But the notion of spending the entire day – and probably the night – away from Arie made his stomach churn.

“I apologize for dragging you away from your new bride so soon ...” The sympathy in Henry’s eyes was genuine. “I promise to get you back as soon as possible.”

Lee cleared his throat, but then he nodded. “Fine. Give me a few minutes to get dressed and I will meet you below shortly.”

Henry stood up and took Lee’s hand, shaking it heartily. “Back as soon as possible,” he reiterated. Lee made something akin to a growl as the two other men exited the room.

Lee rubbed his hand over his eyes and then brought his fist down upon the door twice in half-hearted frustration. He heard the door behind him open.

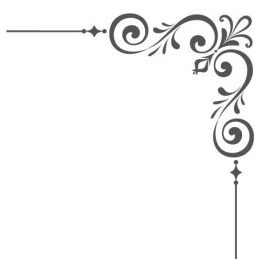
“Did you hear everything?”

Arie nodded. The sight of her in the doorway nearly undid him – hair around her shoulders, garbed only in a bedsheet that she held in place above her breasts. “Will you be gone tonight?”

Lee gritted his teeth. “Most likely.”

“I will miss you,” she said quietly – and to her surprise – quite honestly.

Lee crossed the room in three long steps, pulling her against him and kissing her fervently. It took all his strength to pull back, resting his forehead against hers. “You have no idea,” he growled.



Chapter 16

“**M**iss Pratt – I mean Viscountess Bayfield –”

“Arie is fine, sweetheart.”

“Arie, will you come and watch our performance?” May asked excitedly, taking Arie’s answer for granted as she dragged her earnestly into the sitting room where Arie had taken refuge on her first day at Carcliffe Castle. The other children were already seated in front of the fireplace, while a ring of adults was fanned out in a dutiful audience.

The children formed a precocious little quartet – May, April, Juniper, and August all seated in a line. They’d even dragged over little Nora and set her up at the end, though she was more interested in trying to chew on her makeshift drum than play it.

August – the eldest at thirteen years old, waited until all of the younger children were in line and then counted off. “One, two, three!”

They blasted off into a cacophony of drumming. Two of them had real instruments in front of them, while the three others were using an overturned pot, a vase, and a hatbox respectively. Arie exchanged a grin with Madison. Henry’s sisters Erica and Helen had nearly identical half-smiles, half-pained looks on their faces.

Arie leaned over to Erica. “What song are they supposed to be playing?” She whispered.

“I *think* it’s meant to be the twelve days of Christmas ...” Erica bit her lip to keep from chuckling.

Arie was just managing to keep a straight face. “Are they the nine drummers drumming?”

“They’re a few drummers short.” Erica did laugh this time. “And more than a few beats out of sync.”

The four women watched with indulgent smiles on their faces as the children finished in a loud and discordant crescendo. August finished first, then May. The elder cousin looked daggers at the two still playing but the younger girls did not even notice him. Nora rounded them out with an enthusiastic *smack* of her head on the hatbox in front of her. The audience dissolved into laughter and riotous applause.

Pulling a bawling Nora into her lap, Madison turned to Arie. “You’re such a good sport for sitting through that.”

Arie laughed, reaching out to tickle one of Nora's chubby little cheeks. "They are adorable," she said honestly.

"Maybe you'll have one of your own before too long." Madison winked conspiratorially. "How are things going on ... that front?"

Arie kept her eyes on Nora and tried not to blush. "Things are going well."

Madison's eyes lit up excitedly. She leaned forward, clearly hoping for more details.

"Unfortunately, we were interrupted this morning by your husband and Christopher."

Madison made a particularly unladylike sound. "What nonsense, that whole matter. I am ready to wash my hands of that willful girl."

"You were once a willful girl," Arie pointed out. "I seem to remember you inserting yourself into Henry's path quite forcefully and quite ambivalently to notions of propriety."

Madison pursed her lips. "I do hope you've forgiven me, after all these years?"

"I did think I would spend the rest of my life on the shelf, thanks to you," Arie teased.

"I have endeavored to set you up many times," Madison reminded her.

"And yet, it took being compromised to get me to the altar," Arie observed wryly.

"The castle knows best, it would seem." Madison did not even attempt to keep the self-satisfied smile from her face.

Arie shook her head. "You all and that fairytale nonsense." She held out a biscuit to Nora, tempting the cherubic toddler into her arms. Madison laughed as Nora lunged and Arie caught her deftly.

"You say nonsense. I say fate."



SHE DID NOT LIKE SLEEPING alone.

For twenty-four years, she'd enjoyed having the entire bed to herself – stretching like a starfish across the four corners of the bed, rolling around throughout the night heedless of sharing space or blankets with another.

Two nights. Two nights spent in Lee's arms was all it had taken to convert her fully. She never wanted to sleep alone again. Specifically, she never wanted to sleep without Lee again. All night, she tossed to and fro. First, she was too hot. Then she was too cold. It was eerily like the morning she'd awoken and ventured out to the ruins of the old castle – that fateful morning that changed her life.

But the more time she spent with Lee, the more that Arie was convinced that maybe Madison did have the right of things. Maybe,

just maybe, fate or something like it had a hand in making her life come out just right in ways she could never have anticipated.

It was not quite midnight when Arie decided she would get out of bed and read for a spell, to see if she could quiet her mind enough to sleep. She threw back the coverlet and went to the corner of the room where her thick winter dressing gown was tossed over the three-paneled screen she'd been changing behind. *No more need for that.* Lee had seen all of her there was to see – more. He seemed to see right into her soul. And, she was coming to realize, she wanted him to.

She wrapped the dressing gown around her, tying it tightly against the chilly night air. A breeze ruffled the curtains, blowing them apart. *Was that a light?* Arie paused, half-turned towards the sitting room where she'd planned to go read. But just like that fateful morning when a ruffle of the curtains had drawn her gaze outside, she once again went to the window and parted the drapery. She pushed aside Madison and Lee's voices inside her head, telling her the castle was at work again.

It was a light. It was very dark outside. Near to the house, she could see a little bit of definition in the snow where the torches outside the front doors cast shadows of undulating light. But the little glow of yellow light was much farther afield – and higher up. It must be coming from the old castle ruins atop the hill. Arie squinted, leaning forward to try and see what was happening until the tip of her nose touched the cold glass window pane.

There was someone up on the ruins. She watched as the little light – it must be a lamp or torch of some kind – moved up the hill and then to the right. Towards the tumbled down side of the old castle? It stayed there for several minutes, and then moved back towards the entrance of the circular tower and disappeared. Whoever it was must have gone inside.

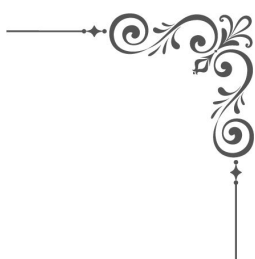
Arie jumped as the mantle clock chimed midnight, knocking her forehead against the window. She rubbed her head but kept her eyes trained on the spot where the light had disappeared. Determined to keep watching, she nestled herself onto the windowsill.

When the clock chimed half past the hour, she jolted awake.

Her eyes went immediately back outside, but there was only darkness. She sighed. There was no telling how long she'd been asleep and if the little light – and the person carrying it – had returned. She watched for a few more minutes, but when nothing and no one appeared she resigned herself to returning to bed. Stifling a yawn, Arie crawled beneath the coverlet. Her mind was clouded as she drifted off to sleep, but two thoughts rose to the top: *Who would be wandering around the ruins in the middle of a frigid December night? And why?*



*On the tenth day of Christmas my true love sent to me
Ten pipers piping ...*



Chapter 17

January 3rd, 1816

They'd ridden hard since leaving London that morning and their horses were tired. Lee was gripping the reins hard, eager to urge his mount forward over the last few miles of their journey. But Henry slowed and Lee had no choice but to match his pace.

Henry shot Lee a knowing look. "We'll be back in time for afternoon tea."

Lee cleared his throat and shifted his weight atop the horse. He did not love that he was so easy to read. *Oh hell – what did it matter?* He wanted to get back to Arie. Back to where they'd left off. Back to holding her, kissing her, loving her ... yes, damn it. He would tell her he loved her. When she was awake this time. She might not be ready to return the words, but he did not care. She'd offered him her mind, her body ... he felt sure that her heart would follow.

"Thank you for your help. Leaving Arie can't have been easy."

Lee sighed. "I could hardly say no," he pointed out wryly. "But you are welcome, nonetheless."

"How are things between you and Arie? I have known her for a long time. She can be ... opinionated."

"She's a treasure," Lee said simply.

The left side of Henry's mouth rose in unison with his eyebrow. "I am glad we are agreed."

"It's a little late to be interrogating me about my intentions, don't you think?"

"Perhaps," Henry acknowledged with a laugh. "But without her parents here – I just want to make sure she is well taken care of."

"You need have no concerns on my account."

"Good."

They rode on in silence for a while, alternating their mounts between a walk and a slow trot. Even so, they were eating up the miles between them and Carcliffe Castle. Before long, the spires of the castle appeared over the top of a hill ahead of them.

"See? Home by tea time, just as I promised."

"You'll excuse me if I miss tea," Lee said with every pretense of politeness. But Henry was not fooled. He grinned wickedly.

"I expect Mr. and Mrs. Wilks will want to see the ceremony

completed as soon as possible. Probably this evening.”

Lee groaned.

“Take heart. Patience is a virtue, my friend.”



She seemed to float down the aisle. Her gown – diaphanous silk in an iridescent, shimmering gray – swayed around her like a cloud at twilight. Her dark gold hair was styled artfully but all he noticed was the way her eyes seemed to sparkle of their own accord. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen and it was not a close competition. And she was about to be his wife.

“Last night was the longest of my life,” Arie whispered into his ear. Her warm breath and the sweet scent of the fragrance she wore were a disarming combination. Lee shivered and tightened his grip on her hand.

“You will never spend another night alone,” Lee promised empathically. He felt her chuckle, her body pressed tightly against his in the pew. When would this blasted ceremony be over?

Her hands were shaking so hard that her white satin gloves kept sliding down her arms. She tried to slide them back into place surreptitiously as she walked slowly down the aisle. At the other end, her fiancé stood next to the vicar. Lord, he was handsome. She’d noticed it the first time they met but she had not fully appreciated it until now. He was hers.

“She does make a beautiful bride,” Arie said quietly. Lee glanced over as the young woman, hardly old enough to be married, walked down the aisle on her father’s arm. He did not have much sympathy left to spare of Susan Wilks. Besides, he was much too occupied with his own beautiful bride.

Music filled the small chapel suddenly as a parade of pipers appeared behind the bride and her father. They walked in perfect timing, splitting and walking around the outside of the pews in two even groups.

“Bagpipes?” Lee asked, eyebrows raised.

“Their family is Scottish. Madison told me Mr. Wilks has been at work for the past two days scrounging up residents in the vicinity who

could play for his daughter's wedding," Arie explained in hushed tones. "I think it's rather sweet."

She reached the end of the aisle, clinging to the spray of Christmas roses that Madison had handed her just before she started down. Over Lee's shoulder, seated in the first pew, her friend gave her an encouraging smile. Taking courage, Arie turned her eyes to Lee. And there they were waiting for her – those bright blue, eternally earnest, and kind eyes. They caught hers and seemed to caress and comfort. Despite her rapidly fluttering pulse, she felt a wave of calm.

"Dearly beloved, we have gathered here ..."

Arie leaned her head over and rested it on Lee's shoulder. Dressed in pale blue silk with an intricately beaded overlay, Susan made a lovely bride. Opposite her, Drake was dashing in a black tailcoat and breeches, stark white shirt and cravat, and ice blue waistcoat that complimented Susan's gown. They were a handsome couple. And despite her dislike for both parties, Arie could not help but be stirred by the words of the service.

Tilting her head, she looked up at Lee.

It was time for the exchange of rings. Madison appeared and very discreetly took the spray of roses from Arie's hands. Lee reached into the inner breast pocket of his tailcoat and pulled out the opal ring Arie had selected. His own ring – the one he'd removed from his finger and added to the choices at the last moment. He'd never believed in such things as fate – he was much too practical. But now it seemed undeniable – that he'd owned the perfect ring, brought it with him to Carcliffe Castle, and now was slipping it onto his wife's finger.

She started to slide off her glove. He reached up to assist her, his palm grazing her forearm. She breathed in sharply. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze before sliding the ring onto her finger. The tiny smile she offered melted him.

Lee could feel her eyes on him. He turned to find her gazing up at him, completely ignoring the union happening before them. Those deep gray eyes – sometimes clever, always passionate – were looking at him with such intensity. He could not resist. He leaned down and kissed her.

Their lips finally touched, softly coming together in a lingering caress. There was no time for anything more, but it was enough. A jolt of lightning, energy, awareness coursed through them both. This may be their first kiss. But it was full of promise.

THEY WALKED UPSTAIRS without talking. There was nothing else that needed to be said between them. Only what needed to be done. The second they turned the corner at the top of the stairs and were fully out of view of the guests milling about below, Lee tightened his grip on her hand and pulled her against him. Arie gave a surprised little squeal but welcomed his kiss, drawing his hands around her.

Lee could hardly contain himself. He backed her up against the wall, pressing his body close to hers. She arched against him, the wall providing a delightful anchor for her to press her curves against his hard-muscled planes.

Arie had spent the last two days wishing and waiting for Lee to come back. In that time, she'd come to peace with herself and her marriage. Was it the romantic courtship and loud declarations of true love she'd always told herself she wanted? No. But what she'd found with Lee was special – partnership, trust, respect, safety. Was all of that love? She wasn't sure yet. But she knew whatever it was, she wanted to keep it. And she wanted him.

The looks Arie had been sending his way since he arrived back that afternoon were enough to bring a grown man to the brink of insanity. She'd been waiting by the door when he'd arrived. She'd held his hand earnestly, and as soon as they were alone in the parlor she kissed him eagerly. He'd almost ignored all sense of propriety and swept her into his arms to carry her up to their suite right then. But by some miracle, Lee kept himself under control through afternoon tea, the early evening wedding, and supper. Now that he had her alone ...

She gulped for air. "How long are we going to dawdle in the hallway?"

Lee was tempted to show her just how provocative a dalliance in the hallway could be. But not now; not for her first time, at least. He relaxed his hold on her. "You have become quite insistent," he teased.

"You should not have stayed away so long."

"You were all I thought of."

She found herself breathless at the thought. "And what exactly did you think about?"

Lee chuckled huskily. "I think I'd better show you."

He opened the door of their suite, followed Arie in, and closed it firmly behind him. And they were finally, blissfully – alone.

Arie stood behind one of the wingback chairs that faced the sitting room fireplace, one hand resting casually on the back of the chair and the other toying with the lace neckline of her gown. Whether she was doing it intentionally or absent-mindedly did not matter. It had the same effect.

Crossing the room to her, Lee lifted those fingertips from her bosom to his lips, kissing each one. When he arrived at her index finger, he sucked the tip into his mouth and caressed it with his tongue. Arie gave him a strange look, her eyes wide, but she did not speak. He replaced her hand with his own, running his fingertips over the tender flesh just above the neckline of her gown. Sliding his fingers beneath the lace, he touched her further.

Arie's breath caught in her throat as she turned her face up to his. "Kiss me."

Lee needed no further invitation. He brought his mouth to hers, touching their lips together softly. Then a shudder shook him and all thoughts of softness faded away. His kiss was melting – their mouths both hot with anticipation finally fulfilled. Lee tried to tug at the top of her gown, to slide his fingers beneath the structured lace and taffeta bodice. But her breasts filled it too fully, he could not get in. He felt her chuckle against him as he made a little growl of frustration.

Arie grabbed hold of his hands and brought them around to the back of her gown. Somehow Lee was able to get the buttons unfastened, though he was not sure how. All he was aware of was the way her tongue was boldly exploring his mouth while her body pressed against his eagerly. Then the gown was slipping free of her shoulders and he could finally touch the rounded curve of her breasts. He slid his hands forward to touch the swells above her corset and found ... nothing but her thin chemise between him and her trembling skin. He drew back fractionally so his eyes could confirm his hands' discovery.

"I wanted to expedite matters," Arie said very practically, a cheeky smile on her face. "I've also forgone my stockings." She helpfully held out a bare foot, having kicked off her slippers as she entered the room. She stood before him in nothing but her thin chemise, its square-cut neckline so low it ended just above her nipples, the strips on her shoulders leaving her arms bare. The tantalizing line of her collarbone was begging to be kissed.

"You have me at a bit of a disadvantage, Viscountess," Lee said hoarsely. He was completely overtaken by the sight of her.

Emboldened by the look on his face, Arie reached up and slid the straps of the chemise over her shoulders. Then she eased the loose cut garment down over her hips, releasing it to join the growing puddle of fabric at her feet.

Her skin was burning with anticipation. She fought the urge to look down demurely and instead raised her eyes to meet her husband's glowing gaze. His eyes were bright as the center of a flame – a deep blue that stirred her soul.

His eyes never leaving hers, Lee promptly shed his tailcoat and waistcoat. He tugged his shirt free from his trousers and pulled it over his head as well, leaving his bare chest exposed. Arie's eyes widened and she had the sudden urge to lick her lips as she took in his muscular chest and the spray of dark hair that covered it. The hair on his chest was longer than the close-cropped hair on his head and curled slightly. She smiled to herself – it was private knowledge that only she, his wife, would carry with her. And there was something heady and wicked about that.

Before Lee could step forward, Arie closed the space between them. She slid her fingers up his chest, tangling them in the coarse curls and even flicking her thumbs over his nipples. She was delighted to see them rise and harden just as hers had when touched.

"You have learned too well." Lee caught one of her hands and pressed a kiss to the tender flesh inside her wrist.

"I've had an excellent tutor."

He raised her arm, laying a line of kisses up her inner arm until he reached the apex where it joined her body. With her arm raised above her head, her breast quivered in front of him enticingly. Lee flicked his eyes upward and held her gaze as he lowered his mouth to her nipple.

She was unable to tear her eyes away. Lee's lips closed around her dark pink nipple. As his tongue circled and sucked, she could see his cheeks and lips moving. It was the most surreal experience to watch him give her pleasure at the same time that those jolts of delight were coursing through her.

When his teeth nipped the hard little bud, she made the delicious squeak again. Lee's hand found hers, grasping the back of the chair hard to keep herself vertical. The second time she squeaked he felt her legs quake against him. Pulling his mouth away, she made another little mewl, this one of disapproval.

"Hold on, my love," he said as he scooped her up. Arie wrapped her arms around him and set to kissing his neck the way he'd been kissing hers yesterday. Lee stumbled and nearly dropped them both to the ground. "You're going to kill us both."

"At least we will die happy." Arie's already deep voice was huskier than normal as he lowered her to the bed.

The room was still fully alight – a fact they both appreciated. The better to see the other's pleasure. Her gray eyes called to him, drawing him down to her. Lee pressed a kiss to each cheek just below those

alluring gray eyes before reclaiming her lips again. As their tongues danced passionately together he slid his hand downward, intent on exploring her depths without the barriers of snow-covered hills or the layers of fabric.

The moment he touched her soft mound, she felt that rush of heat and wetness that he'd summoned twice before. Lee made a sound of appreciation against her mouth as he discovered how slick and ready she was. Lord, he wanted her. Determined to draw it out for both of them, he pulled back from their kiss just as he slid a finger inside of her – so he could see her face the moment he entered her for the first time.

It was a queer sensation – for a moment it felt like an intrusion. Then Lee slowly drew his hand back and then forward again, and then again, and Arie felt herself lift her hips to welcome his touch. He alternated his movement, first in and out, then drawing wider and wider circles inside of her so he was exploring her most intimate walls. She was clinging to him, her hands on his shoulders and her nails biting into his skin. Her eyes flitted closed, her head falling back as she moaned in open-mouthed, unrestrained pleasure.

Lee pulled his hand out of her, but when he did not return her eyes flicked open and found his questioningly. She watched as he shifted off of her on the bed, pulled his trousers off, and then climbed back on. Her eyes widened – she'd felt his hard length against her but seeing it freed, tumescent, and ready was another thing altogether. She heard the deep rumble of a chuckle in his chest.

He kissed her reassuringly until he felt her relax against him. Then he pulled back. Lee wanted to watch her face – to hear every sound she made as they were finally joined together. Arie returned his bold gaze, her pink lips puffed out and swollen from the passion of their kisses, parted just slightly as she breathed in rapidly again and again.

For just a moment, Lee flicked his gaze down so he could see the rise and fall of her delectable breasts. Then he reached down to guide himself inside of her. She was warm and wet, ready for him. She instinctively arched her hips and he finally entered her.

Arie gasped, her eyes slowly closing as the feeling of fullness and inexplicable pleasure filled her body and soul.

“Look at me, love,” Lee urged.

Arie forced herself to open her eyes, looking directly into his. Somehow it seemed to increase the intensity. *How was that even possible?* But there it was – every stroke of sensation was magnified as she watched the same feelings she felt inside her body play across Lee's face.

She was making a repetitive ‘oh, oh, oh’ with each thrust of their bodies together. Then suddenly, Arie went silent. For a second her

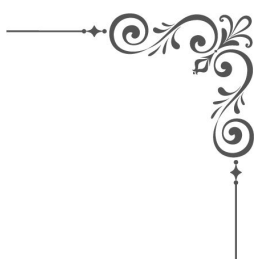
eyes closed and then she seemed to remember Lee's plea for they flew open and locked on his as a primal moan ripped from her throat. Watching her climax was more than Lee could take. He was so close to exploding. Arie thrust her hips against him forcefully and he could hold back no more. His cry was deep and feral. It took all his concentration to keep his eyes on hers as he finally gave in to his own bursts of pleasure.

His arms were shaking as he held himself above her, staring into her eyes as both of their breathing slowly returned to normal. Lee lowered his head to hers very deliberately and kissed her thoroughly. When he tried to raise himself back up, he found Arie's arms around his shoulders, holding him down until he relaxed on top of her. He tried to roll away, sure he must be crushing her, but she would not let him go.

Arie savored the feeling of him pressed against her, his softened length still inside of her, finally and completely joined. This was so much more than husband and wife. This was heaven.



*On the eleventh day of Christmas my true love sent to me
Eleven ladies dancing ...*



Chapter 18

January 4th, 1816

“Arie? Arie? Arie, are you alright?”

“Hmm?”

Kelly looked worried, her dark eyebrows furrowed and her head tilted to one side as she considered her friend. They both held teacups in their hands but Arie was gazing off unhearing.

“Are you alright, dear?” Kelly repeated. “You seem very distant.”

Arie blushed. She took a sip of tea to try and cover her embarrassment, but Kelly was sharp. Her gaze shifted from worry to a knowing half-smile.

“Never mind me,” Kelly amended. “You are more than alright. I can see that now.” She hid a soft chuckle in the brown depths of her teacup.

“I know Madison would like me to speak with her about it, but Henry has become my friend too over the years and I just cannot get certain images out of my head,” Arie began. To her credit, Kelly did not actually snort into her teacup, but she most definitely had to set it down to stop from spilling it.

“And since we are new friends, you are under no such complications?”

“Is that terrible?” Arie asked weakly.

“Not at all.” As always, Kelly’s smile was unfailingly kind and reassuring.

“Lee and I finally ... well ... consummated our marriage.”

“I can see from the look on your face that it was a more than satisfactory experience.”

Arie did not need a mirror to know that a deep red flush was climbing her cheeks. She nodded her head in acknowledgment.

“I am very happy for you.” Kelly thought of her wedding night ... and a few evenings spent with Theo before then. Her own body was effused with warm remembrance and genuine happiness for her new friend.

“Kelly, is it always so ... much?”

“So much, what, exactly?”

“I cannot even put words to it,” Arie shook her head, completely at a loss. “So much ...” she shrugged in defeat.

Kelly's smile softened. "I don't think it is for everyone," she said softly. "But for Theo and I? Yes, always."

Arie felt something growing inside of her stomach, her chest, her heart. It had been slowly coming to life for a while now, but over the last twenty-four hours it seemed to have burst into bloom.

"Thank you, Kelly." Arie reached out and squeezed the other woman's hand. Kelly covered it with her other one and returned the embrace.

Over Kelly's shoulder, a movement caught Arie's eye. Lee was sipping from his own morning tea while chatting idly with Mr. Wilks and Henry's brother-in-law Thomas. He tilted his head towards the doorway where the sitting room gave way to Carcliffe Castle's grand entry hall, an imploring expression below his dark, raised eyebrows.

"Kelly, will you excuse me?"

"Of course!" Kelly's eyes followed Arie's gaze over her shoulder, her smile deepening when she caught a glimpse of Lee. "Go on."

Arie gave her friend's hand a final squeeze before setting down her teacup and walking as casually as she could out into the entry hall. She could feel eyes on her back. *Oh, stop*, she chastised herself. The other guests were much too busy to notice or care about her stepping into the hall. Besides, Susan and Drake had just appeared to general congratulations from the group. They were the center of attention now and her own marriage – though less than a week old – was no longer the center of attention.

She stepped into the hall, glancing up the ornate staircase. Perhaps Lee was on his way back to their bedroom ... then a hand went around her waist. Arie gasped, then felt the lips touch her neck followed by Lee's now-familiar scent.

Lee spun her around, burying his hand in the mass of hair at the nape of her neck and bringing her lips to his. They kissed passionately, right there in the middle of the hall. Arie managed to break away first.

"Someone is going to see," she protested.

"Let them." Lee pulled her lower lip between his teeth.

"My lord Viscount, where have your manners gone?" Arie teased as she allowed Lee to move her through the hall and into the adjoining game room, his lips never pausing in their quest to kiss every inch of her exposed skin.

"I have manners. I am ravaging you in private rather than in the middle of the parlor." Lee paused just long enough to grin up at her.

"You and I have rather different definitions of private." But she did not stop him. Instead, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer. "I thought I'd married such a proper and straight-laced gentleman, only to find you a rogue at last," she purred.

“And I have a wanton for a wife,” he retorted, pulling her earlobe between his teeth as he had her lip. “But neither of us seem greatly displeased.”

“Pleased,” Arie rolled the word off her lips. “Yes, I am quite pleased.” She sounded like she was drunk. Perhaps she was a bit. But with something much headier than spirits.

Lee was determinedly pushing her dress aside so he could slide his hand inside her bodice. She’d been accommodating enough to wear a looser garment today – a pale lavender muslin gown that was becoming in its simplicity. And its ease of access. He could almost feel her nipple through the thin fabric –

“We will just gather up the rest of the guests while the carriages are being brought round.” Henry’s voice penetrated their interlude quite inconveniently.

Arie and Lee both froze. They slowly drew their lips apart and waited to see if the voice was about to be followed by the man. But he seemed to be talking to someone in the hall.

“Should we say we’ve taken ill?” Lee suggested.

Arie leaned forward and kissed him so deeply Lee thought she meant for them to continue. His hand slid up the front of her bodice to resume its caress, but she caught it in her own. She shook her head, smiling cheekily. “We must be dutiful guests.”

Lee’s eyes narrowed. “Minx.”

Arie stepped back and smoothed her dress, adjusting her bodice and patting her hair to make sure everything was still reasonably in place. “Come, husband. It seems we are to have an outing into the village.”

Straightening himself up, Lee offered her his arm. “Alright, wife. But you are not getting away from me that easily.”

“I am depending upon it,” she whispered as they joined the growing group of guests milling about the hall.



ONCE AGAIN, THE MARQUESS and marchioness had arranged a splendid and thoughtful day of entertainment for their guests. What had begun as an opportunity for their wealthy guests to patronize the local shops and businesses in the nearby village had evolved into a winter festival of sorts. Food vendors had set up their carts and even a handful of stalls around the town square – hot mulled wine, meat pies, and other English delicacies were on offer for just a few coins. All of the shop windows were outfitted gaily in evergreen boughs and there were more than a few kissing wreaths hanging over doorways.

And it was not just the Carcliffe Castle guests out enjoying themselves. The nearby country gentry had also come out. Madison

and Henry were busy making the rounds, saying hello to their neighbors and introducing their guests to the other important residents of the county. And the villagers themselves were wrapped in their warm cloaks, scarves, and hats, participating in the general merriment.

It was clear that the marquess and marchioness were very popular – they had hardly a moment to themselves. Although it was only midmorning, the festivities were in full swing. That suited Lee and Arie fine. They were perfectly content to walk arm in arm, browsing the stalls and shops and sneaking secret strokes and touches under the guise of sharing warmth.

“How does Madison manage to pull such things off? There has been something every single day,” Lee mused as he handed Arie a mug of steaming hot wine.

“She was born to be a hostess,” Arie agreed. The wine was sweet and spicy. “Mmmmm,” she cooed as she took a sip.

“I hope you don’t expect such extravagancy from your Viscountess,” Arie said drolly.

“My home is nowhere near as grand as Carcliffe Castle, I assure you.”

“It is strange to think that in two days I will be leaving Carcliffe Castle. But instead of returning to London or my parents’ home in Nottingham, I will be going to Devonshire with you.” Arie’s eyes took on a faraway look as she imagined.

“I suppose you’re right. I had not thought of it,” Lee said with a chuckle. “I’ve been rather ... preoccupied.”

Arie pinched his arm playfully.

“We could go first to Nottingham, to see your parents, if you prefer. I could not stay long. I must return to Devon. I left a few items open-ended to come here for Christmastide, but they must be seen to soon. You could follow once you’ve had time to attend to your possessions and such.”

She arched her eyebrows disapprovingly. “I believe I told you I do not fancy sleeping alone.”

Lee’s heart clenched tightly within his chest. Two weeks ago, he’d never have imagined such happiness could be his. He squeezed her gloved hand tightly where it was tucked into his arm. “Alright then.”

The row of stalls they’d been walking down ended at the town square. They came to stand at the edge of the grassy area, which had been shoveled clear of snow. Despite the cold – or perhaps because of it – several young people had taken to dancing merrily. A makeshift band had taken up near the fountain at the edge of the square, including one of the bagpipe players who’d attended Drake and Susan’s wedding the day before. There must be near to a dozen ladies

with their young men dancing happily, their cheeks red and their warm breath rising above them in a cloud. Arie laid her head against Lee's shoulder in absolute contentment.

"It's like a preview of the Twelfth Night ball Madison is hosting tomorrow."

Arie lifted her head to look up at her husband doubtfully. "Have you ever been to one of Madison's balls?"

"No ..."

Arie just smiled. "Let's call this a ..." she cocked her head to the side as she searched for the right words. "A shadow of a preview."

Lee just laughed and turned back to look at the revelers.

Once again, Arie felt the nagging feeling of being watched. She glanced over at Lee but he seemed undisturbed. Turning slowly, Arie's sharp gray eyes scanned the crowd of people gathered around the square. There were little August and Junie, dancing together at the edge of the cleared area while their parents looked on. A little way behind the crowd stood Madison and Henry, talking to another well-dressed couple whom Arie did not recognize but must be gentle neighbors.

Mr. and Mrs. Wilks were talking with the proprietor of a booth selling woolen goods. The other newlyweds, Susan and Drake, were almost directly opposite to Lee and Arie, also watching the merriment in the square. Susan's face was flushed prettily and she was smiling. She looked like a happy enough bride. Arie met Drake's eyes for just a moment. The dark orbs were unreadable, his mouth set in a straight line and his long hair forward as always over his brow. He did not look as happy as Susan.

Arie forced herself to smile and nod in acknowledgment. Drake returned her nod but did not smile. Then he shifted his gaze away.

Perhaps he was not as pleased in his match as Susan was. Well, that was their fate to sort out. Though Arie could not help feeling a bit bad for them. She'd been compromised and fallen into ... *well, into love with her new husband*. One glance at that couple was enough to discern that they had not been as lucky.

Arie glanced back up at Lee and did a sudden double-take. *In love*. The thought had come and gone so casually! As if it was the most normal thing in the world!

She did a quick inventory – her heart was beating rapidly, her stomach did a little flip as she gazed up at her handsome husband, watched the kind smile on his lips – yes, she was very much in love with him. Hell's bells. *It really was a happy Christmas*.



THEY SHARED A CARRIAGE back with Meera and Christopher.

Despite the brotherly jabs, Arie found she did enjoy her new in-laws' company. They had the most exciting tales to tell about their recent exploits across the Mediterranean.

"I hope you aren't fantasizing about jaunting off to Egypt," Lee said as he handed her down from the carriage behind Meera and Christopher.

"And if I was?" She teased.

"I would tell you that you married the wrong brother." But as he said it he drew her close, confident in her response despite their comparatively short acquaintance.

"Scotland or Wales are the wildest of venues I ever hope to explore," Arie assured him as they stepped into the warm embrace of the castle.

"Thank god."

As the footmen and maids divested them of their coats, they moved towards the parlor to join the other guests. Arie stepped to the side. "Excuse me for just a moment," she said, moving towards the stairs.

"Is something amiss?" Lee reached for her arm in concern.

She patted his hand and smiled reassuringly. "Nothing at all. I just want to retrieve something from upstairs. I will be along in just a moment."

Lee nodded, raising her hand to his lips. "Alright. Be along quickly. If I have to go looking for you upstairs I might get distracted by the presence of the bed."

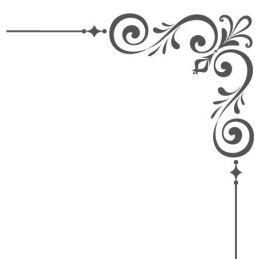
Warmed by the blush *that* comment engendered, Arie started up the stairs. As she turned the first corner she stumbled. Touching the wall to keep her balance, she pulled aside her gown and saw that the laces of her boot had come untied. She kneeled down to retie it, then stood and straightened her gown.

Strong arms came around her and she leaned back instinctively. "I see you could not resist –"

"Don't say a word, or I will break your neck."

She tried to scream despite the warning. He moved his hand away and she inhaled sharply, ready to bellow as loud as she could. But he sank a fist hard into her stomach, knocking the air out of her. Her cry came out as nothing more than a strangled gasp.

He did not waste the moment. His hand left her mouth and was replaced by a twist of fabric which he tied tightly behind her neck to keep her silent. Her first thought was that his shaving cream was much different than Lee's – the scent that permeated the handkerchief tied around her mouth was much spicier. And she recognized it instantly.



Chapter 19

He threw her down hard on the cold ground. The entire trek down through the servants' quarters and through the knee-deep snow she'd wanted to scream and rage and demand to know what was going on. But she could do none of it. She was very effectively gagged.

The instant they'd started up the hill she'd known their destination: the old castle ruins.

Arie's bottom landed hard on a fragment of stone rubble. She rubbed her hand over her derriere, thankful for the generous layer of padding that Lee had expressed such fondness for. *Lee*. What would he do when she did not return? Would he make good on his promise to fetch her? Find her missing? Then what?

"Stand up, turn around, and put your hands on the wall."

Arie was jolted back. She stood up slowly, thankful that her hands were still free even if her mouth wasn't. He did not think her a bodily threat. She did as he said, turning to face the wall. He shoved her up against the cold stone, pinning her with the strength of his much bigger body. Then she felt the tie at the back of her neck come loose.

"What do you want? What is this about?" She demanded immediately.

Drake stepped back suddenly, releasing her. Arie stumbled. She slowly turned around, holding on to the wall behind her. Its upright strength was a small comfort.

"I am sorry for the drama back there but it had to be done. I had to get you out here." As he spoke Drake flexed his fingers as if they were sore, as if he had been inconvenienced by threatening her life and dragging her out into the snowy evening. "Where is the treasure?"

Arie's gut felt hollow. "The treasure?"

"Lady Booth's treasure. Do not pretend you don't know exactly what I am talking about." Drake's voice was sharp and direct.

Arie tried to reconcile the man that stood before her with the one who had paid her such over the top compliments and attentions just a week ago. He was still well-dressed and good-looking, with a tall and confident bearing. But his charming smile was gone. His mouth was set in a hard line and his arms were folded tightly across his body. As the dark hair fell over his brow now it did not look handsomely roguish; it was eerily sinister.

“Are you referring to the fairy tale Henry told? On Christmas?”

Drake’s eyes narrowed, his fist coming down hard against the wall of the little room – the same one that Arie and Lee had been discovered in by Susan. “Tell me where it is.”

“How should I know?” Arie was truly baffled. “It’s a story! A legend!”

“You are playing with me.” His dark eyes were in shadow but the threatening tenor of his voice was unmistakable.

She gathered her courage and forced herself to stand up straighter and look him directly in the eye. “I am not playing with you. I do not know anything about some godforsaken, mythical treasure.”

“You’re clever, I’ll give you that. You were not convinced by my charms.”

Despite the direness of the situation, Arie let out a biting laugh. “And I was right, wasn’t I? But I just thought you a rake. A fortune hunter at worst. But never this ...” She shook her head as she tried to put the pieces together. “It was you ... sneaking into the ruins at night. That feeling I kept getting ... of being watched ...”

“Of course I was watching you –”

Something dark swung down, catching Drake on the back of his head. He made an awful sound and then fell backward with a crash. Lee appeared behind him, framed by the light coming from the doorway. He stepped over Drake’s prone form and reached for her. Arie fell against him in relief.

“Are you alright?” He was running his hands over her quickly checking for injuries. He touched her lower back and she winced. “Damn him,” he muttered.

Arie held tightly to his sleeve. “How did you know?”

“I decided to follow you upstairs.” Completing his inventory of her body, Lee gripped her shoulders. “You weren’t in the room. But there was a draft of cold ... I went to close the window and I saw him dragging you up the hill. You were only visible for a second, I just happened to look at the right time –”

“He took me around the back side. So no one would see us, I think. A draft of cold ...” A tingling sensation snaked down her spine. A draft of cold just like the one that had drawn her to that same window not once, but twice. Had the castle been ... *trying to warn her*?

But she had no more time to think. Lee was pulling her towards the door. “We’ll send someone up here to get him, let’s –”

“I’m afraid not, my lord Viscount.” Drake had regained consciousness and in a second his feet as well. That split second was all the advantage he gave. He swung his fist towards Lee with terrifying speed and power. Lee pushed Arie back out of the way but doing so cost him. He took Drake’s blow directly to the side of his

head, leaving him reeling unsteadily.

“Leave him alone!” Arie demanded, reaching around for something she could throw or hit Drake with. But the stones around her were too heavy for her to lift.

Drake reached for the heavy broken beam that Lee himself had used to fell the other man. He brought it around towards Lee’s head. Lee ducked just in time to avoid it but not fast enough when Drake brought it around again. He hit Lee square in the chest, knocking him down.

“Lee!” Arie fell to her knees, reaching for her husband.

“Enough!” Drake roared, grabbing Arie’s arm and twisting it painfully behind her back. He dragged her back towards the other end of the room, heedless of the way she stumbled over rocks and ruins. He tossed her down on the ground and then straightened. He grabbed the lapels of his overcoat and adjusted his clothing. “There is no need for all this fuss. Just tell me what I want to know.”

Hunched over and still gasping for breath, Lee managed to get the words out: “Let her go.”

“Tell me where it is and I will do so in an instant.” He spoke with such politeness, but neither Arie nor Lee was fooled. They’d seen the desperation behind the mask. And felt the brutality of it.

“What are you talking about?”

“The treasure!” Drake was losing patience. He wrapped his arm around Arie’s neck, lifting her off the ground. She couldn’t help the desperate whimpers escaping her lips.

Lee’s eyes were wide with fear. He could not attack Drake physically; not when he held Arie so precariously. “Let’s talk about this civilly. I can help you. But first, you must release Arie.”

“I have been trying to handle this civilly from the beginning. But Arie here is refusing to tell me what I need to know.” He kept his hold on her.

“I will tell you everything you want to know. Just let her go.” Lee got to his feet slowly, trying not to spook Drake. He looked to Arie, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. He tried to communicate, to tell her with his gaze to trust him. To go.

Drake reached into his pocket where the handkerchief he’d used to gag Arie still dangled, and tossed it at Lee. “Tie your wrists.”

Lee caught it deftly. “Let her go and we can talk. Man to man.”

“Tie your wrists or,” he tightened his grasp on her neck, the threat implied rather than spoken. *Or I will snap her neck.*

“Listen, Drake –”

Drake thrust his arm upward. Arie yelped helplessly. “Do it.”

Lee took the handkerchief and did as he was bid. It was comically hard to tie one’s own hands together. He struggled with it for an

inordinately long space of time, while his stomach turned over on itself and his heart nearly refused to beat. He had one thought in his head – he could not let any harm come to Arie.

Finally, he managed it, holding up his joined wrists to Drake and pulling his hands apart to demonstrate the effectiveness of his knots. “Now let her go.”

Drake eased his hold on Arie slightly but he did not release her. “Tell me where the treasure is, now.”

Lee opened his mouth to speak, but Arie interrupted. “Lady Booth’s treasure. From the legend that Henry told. Drake is convinced I know where it is.”

“That’s ridiculous –”

“I have seen the two of you sneaking around. Even before you were wed. I overheard Arie speaking with Madison about the magic of the castle. Then the two of you were caught up here looking for the treasure while the rest of us were still abed.”

Lee shook his head. “That was an accident. We just happened upon each other. Arie stumbled and Susan thought she saw more than she actually did.” As he spoke, he was carefully surveying their surroundings and trying to figure out his next move. If he could get closer, he could lunge and knock Drake off balance. Arie and Drake were close to the passageway that led out into the main keep of the tower. If he could get her free, Arie could run for help.

“Do not lie to me. I’ve got you tied up and your wife at my mercy. You know. I’ve watched – you two talking all alone in cupboards and hallways, always whispering and thinking no one noticed. I noticed. You want the treasure for yourself.”

As Drake spoke, Lee inched along the wall closer and closer. He held up his hands to demonstrate his harmlessness. “We were just talking and getting to know each other. I swear.”

Arie was watching Lee. He was moving with purpose. He caught her eye and inclined his head just slightly towards the passageway to her and Drake’s left side. She moved her head fractionally down to acknowledge that she understood. But the motion caught Drake’s attention.

“What would we want with a treasure?” Arie said desperately, trying to distract him. “Lee is a viscount. I am an heiress. You were so interested in what happens to the viscountcy when my father dies. The title will pass on to my second cousin, but I will inherit the estate.”

Drake laughed humorlessly. “Yes, I gleaned something to that effect from Madison. When I happened upon you, an unmarried heiress, I thought I could forget about the treasure. But then the next thing I knew, you were compromised and married to your precious lord. And so the treasure was paramount again.”

“But you see, what motivation would we have for finding the treasure –”

A deep growl rumbled from Drake’s throat. “Who knows? Maybe you were charmed by Henry’s claims about two lovers finding the treasure. If that was necessary, I took care of it by romancing Susan. She was much easier to bring along then you were, Arie.”

“This is insane,” Arie said, for just a moment disbelieving that all of this was happening to her.

“I am not insane.”

The severity of his voice brought Arie back to the precariousness of her situation.

“My father told me the legend of the castle from the time I was a boy. He never thought to claim it but I shall. He left me bloody little to live on, but this will be my true inheritance. I will –”

Lee lunged forward, knocking Drake off his feet. Arie tumbled to the ground but she managed to tuck her legs underneath her and roll away unharmed. But Drake was bigger and he was unencumbered. Arie knew what Lee wanted her to do. She even took two steps towards the passageway. But Drake was back on his feet and kicking Lee hard. She couldn’t leave him, not even to save herself.

“No, please,” she sobbed, throwing herself on top of Drake. He pushed her away like a gnat. But she did not stop, jumping again and pulling at his arm. “Leave him alone! You’ll kill him!”

Drake shook her off again but he stumbled backward a few steps. Nevertheless, his assault had been effective. Lee lay in an unmoving heap amid the rubble. Arie could just see his face – his eyes closed, unconscious.

“You beast!” She screeched, flying at Drake completely irreverent to her own wellbeing. She tore at him like a harpy, leaving long red scratches down one side of his face.

“Be still, woman!” Drake grabbed her wrists, lifting her off the ground. So Arie kicked, landing a solid blow to his midsection and another that just missed his tender man parts. Drake bellowed loudly as he swung her around, once more locking his arm around her neck. “Move one more inch,” he whispered menacingly, his face close enough she could feel the heat of his breath.

A startled cry rang from their right – from the doorway. Drake turned slowly, his grip on Arie’s neck holding tight.

“Drake! What on earth are you doing!” Madison’s eyes were wide with shock and anger. “Release her at once!” she demanded, stepping down into the dim room.

For just a moment, Drake looked as if he might ignore her or brush her aside. But then Henry appeared at her shoulder and the look on his face left no room for indecision. Drake released Arie immediately.

Arie stumbled forward, coughing as the pressure around her neck was released. Madison caught her and tried to put her arm around her friend but Arie shook her off. She had to get to Lee.

She crossed the room in a flash. Her fingers were shaking but she managed to get the first knot of restraints free. As she did, she felt him stir. "Lee, Lee! Are you alright –" she stopped fiddling with his ties and caught his face in her hands. When he opened his eyes she nearly fell over with relief.

Completely ignoring their audience, she rained kisses on his face – first on his cheeks, then his forehead then the bridge of his nose, and finally on his lips. Her fingers went around the back of his head, holding him to her. He groaned in pain and she leapt back. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"I am fine," Lee insisted, speaking for the first time. Despite being a bit raspy, his voice was strong. He nodded towards his still tied hands. "Get these off of me, will you?"

"Of course." Arie blushed at her negligence and went back to work on the knots of fabric, pulled tight by his earlier struggling.

"What is going on here?"

Henry's voice was hard as iron. At his shoulders stood Christopher and Theo. Madison had retreated into the doorway, watching with her hands tightly clasped.

Drake backed towards the wall as he tried to put as much space between him and the three imposing men as possible. "It was a misunderstanding –"

"There is no misunderstanding that would justify putting your hands on a lady," Christopher said flatly, his face hard, his past demons flashing across his eyes.

"It was a misunderstanding," Drake insisted. "Miss Pratt –"

"Viscountess Bayfield," Lee interjected, getting to his feet. He was gripping Arie's hand tightly in his own. "And there was no misunderstanding. You took my wife hostage to try and get information from her and then when that failed, from me."

"Information?" Henry growled.

This time Arie spoke up. "About the legendary Booth treasure." Now that she was free and safe the fear had transformed into indignant anger. "For God only knows what reason, he was convinced that Lee and I knew where it was! That we'd discovered it!"

"Treasure?" Henry repeated. He looked slowly from Lee and Arie over to Drake, who stood against the stone wall with a guilty look upon his usually handsome face.

Henry laughed loudly, a jarring sound that widened the eyes of all assembled. There was no humor in it. Behind him Madison let out a long sigh.

“Drake, you fool. It’s just a legend! A children’s story!” Henry shook his head.

“But you said – there are rumors in the village! My father told me about them when I was growing up! It is here somewhere!” Drake insisted, but his olive skin was turning ashen.

“I’ve seen you with your heads together! Always whispering and sneaking off into different parts of the castle.” Drake stepped forward as he spoke in earnest. Christopher made a sound akin to a growl and Drake fell back.

“They are newlyweds!” Madison cried from the doorway. “What need have they of treasure? Arie’s an heiress. Isn’t that why you were so interested in her in the first place, Drake?”

What little color remained on Drake’s face drained away. “I – well ...” he sputtered.

Henry shook his head in disbelief. “I wish you had just asked me about it, Drake. I could have told you there was no treasure to be found. My grandfather made up that story to drum up interest one year when my father was a boy. They sold tickets to the ruins and gave the money to charity. If you’d only asked ...”

“It can’t be so ...” Drake trailed off brokenly.

“What a disgrace.” Henry turned to Lee. “Vengeance is rightfully yours, my friend. What shall I do with him?”

Lee looked from Drake back to Arie, who held onto his arm. Her hair had come loose from its knot at the nape of her neck, falling in straggly strands around her face and shoulders. While her cheeks had gotten some of their color back and she looked calm enough now, Lee did not think he would ever be able to forget the look of fear on her face when Drake’s arm had been locked around her slender neck.

“Call for the magistrate. Send him to Newgate where he belongs.”

“Noooooooooooo!” A desperate cry wrenched from the doorway.

Susan pushed past Madison, dodging around the trio of men and throwing herself at Drake. She lost her footing as she wrapped her arms around his waist, clinging to him while she continued to wail. “Please! What will become of me! I will be in disgrace,” she sobbed.

“Perhaps you will finally learn some humility and wisdom,” Madison said unsympathetically from the doorway.

Henry’s look was pitying. He motioned forward the two men that flanked him. “Step aside, Mrs. Thornton, so we may take this blackguard into custody.”

Susan did not budge. Henry put his hands on her shoulders and started to gently pull her away while Theo and Christopher each took one of Drake’s arms into their own. Lee felt his stomach finally begin to unclench. It was over. All he wanted now was a hot bath and to hold his wife close while –

“Wait.”

Everyone in the room froze. Lee turned towards Arie, his face questioning.

“He took me first. I should have a say in his punishment as well.”

Lee could not argue the truth of that. He squeezed Arie’s hand and nodded to Henry.

“Release him.”

“I beg your pardon?” Lee dropped Arie’s hand in surprise.

“Lady Bayfield, I don’t think –” Henry began.

“Arie, you’re not thinking clearly.” Lee touched her shoulder, rubbing back and forth over the exposed skin, noting the gooseflesh rising. She’d been wearing no coverings or wrappings when Drake took her. As the adrenaline of the encounter wore off the cold was finally starting to permeate. “Let us get you inside, have a hot bath, and then you may speak to Lord Clydon if you wish.”

“My mind is perfectly sound,” Arie insisted. She rubbed her arms furiously to generate some heat, then took Lee’s hand. She placed a kiss on his knuckles then raised his palm to her face. For just a moment, she let her eyes flutter closed as she soaked in his warmth.

“I am perfectly alright. If we submit Mr. Thornton to the magistrate there will be a trial. We will have to give testimony. This entire ordeal could be drawn out for months.”

“That is no more than he deserves. He could have killed you!” Lee said fiercely, his anger and fear over what could have happened boiling over.

“But he did not.” Arie shook her head. “It is exactly what he deserves, perhaps, but more than either of us do. Please, let us put this to rest. There is no treasure.” As she spoke she glanced over at Henry, her eyebrows raised.

“Most certainly not,” Henry confirmed resolutely.

“Then let him go.”

“You expect me to sit civilly across the dining table from him as if none of this has ever happened? Arie, you ask too much –”

“No, he must go,” she agreed. “They must both go at once.”

“Banished,” Madison said, her voice clear and cool. “Drake and Susan Thornton, you are banished from Carcliffe Castle and Surrey.”

Susan looked wildly between Lee, Arie, Madison, and Henry.

The marquess released Susan’s shoulders. “Take your husband, Susan, and be gone. We will give you an hour to make whatever excuses you must to your parents. But if you linger beyond that I will take him to the magistrate myself.”

The young woman who had just weeks before been in the luminous blush of youth looked quite diminished. Eyes downcast, she nodded. She took her husband’s arm and started for the doorway.

“Lady Bayfield, I –” Drake moved towards Arie. Lee pushed her behind him and stepped forward with such menace on his face the other man cowered instantly.

“Get out.” Lee’s voice was deadly even.

Drake hurried after his young bride without daring another glance over his shoulder.

It was as if the room itself sighed with relief. Everyone relaxed visibly. Madison gave up her post in the doorway, crossing to Henry and laying her forehead on her husband’s shoulder. Theo and Christopher looked at each other awkwardly – they may have been momentarily united but there was no love lost between them. Theo had been happily married for nearly two years, but it would be hard to forget that Christopher’s machinations had almost robbed him of that happiness.

Lee saw none of it. He pulled Arie against him in a crushing embrace. “I am so sorry,” he said, his voice muffled as he pressed his lips in repeated kisses to her soft hair.

Arie drew back so she could see his face. “What have you to be sorry for?”

“I should have protected you.”

“You did protect me.”

“He could have broken your neck, and I would have been tied up helplessly.”

“He could have broken my neck if you refused to tie yourself up.” As she said it, the gravity of the situation they had just escape hit her like ice. She shivered and leaned even closer to Lee.

“I should have done something more.” His voice cracked. Arie reached up and caught the first tear as it fell down his cheek.

“My love ...” she whispered, her heart breaking for loving this man.

“I am sorry,” Lee said again.

She cupped his face and pulled him down to her, kissing him with as much love and strength as she could muster. She leaned into him, trying to merge their bodies the way they had somehow already managed to merge their souls. She lost track of whose tears were whose ... she knew only that the warmth of them mingled on her cheeks as they comforted each other in the best way they knew how.

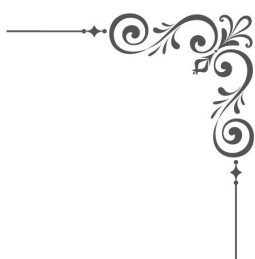
Lee found her hand and held it tightly. “I will always protect you. I promise. I will give you everything in my power to give.”

“*This* is everything. You are everything. Everything I will ever need,” she said softly. If she’d had any doubt of her feelings for Lee, none remained now. He looked down at her from those bright blue eyes, sparkling from the tears he had shed. Her heart felt like it would burst. Quite rudely, a gust of cold rushed through the doorway and

snaked up her back. “Except just now ... I think I need a hot bath.”



*On the twelfth day of Christmas my true love sent to me
Twelve lords a leaping ...*



Chapter 20

January 5th, 1816

The flames started innocuously enough – a few pieces of firewood from the rack, stoked to a flame with tinder and kindling until the bigger logs caught alight. Over the course of an hour the flames grew, finding new fuel until they stood as high as a grown man.

Against the backdrop of iridescent white snow and inky black night the flames glowed with an almost supernatural ferocity. Scarlett, gold, and orange tendrils dancing together as they reached skyward.

The fire blazed hot and fast, tearing through the boughs of greenery and ribbons that Madison and her staff had so carefully crafted and arranged. The inferno enveloped the ornate decorations and kissing boughs without discrimination. The heralds of the holiday season at Carcliffe Castle disappeared into dark smoke and ash that caught in the wind and drifted upwards towards the sparkling stars.

“I love you.”

“I know.”

Lee nipped at her ear and Arie laughed, drawing her husband’s arms more tightly around her as they watched the mighty bonfire. She turned her face up over her shoulder so she could look into those enchanting blue eyes of his. Her own eyes, their gray turned almost black in the firelight, fluttered closed as she pressed her lips to his. “I love you too,” she said softly.

“How did it happen so fast? I came to Carcliffe Castle all but a confirmed bachelor. And somehow, now I am a happily married man?” Lee shook his head. Even if he could somehow go back and tell his past self about the strange turn of events this Christmastide, he was sure no version of himself would believe the tale.

“You very insistently pulled me off of my shelf. Thank you for that.”

“You are much too special to spend your life alone. You deserve to be admired,” he kissed her forehead – “Worshiped,” he kissed her neck – “Adored,” he slid one hand inside of her cloak and cupped her breast.

“Lee –” Arie started to protest, looking wildly around them. But the dark winter night shielded them from view.

Behind them, the lights of Carcliffe Castle shone brightly, casting

long rectangles of light onto the snowy ground. Arie could see the tall windows of the ballroom, full to brimming with guests of the marquess and marchioness' Twelfth Night ball. Elegantly dressed pairs glided past the windows, then separated as the lords executed the almost gymnastic leaps of the country dance before rejoining and lifting their ladies. There must be dozens of couples dancing, though Arie completely lost count as they swirled and twirled past the glass windows. She turned her eyes back to the bonfire, around which many more guests and even some servants were gathered.

As per tradition, all decorations and remnants of the holiday must be taken down and disposed of before tomorrow – the celebration of Epiphany. They would attend services in the morning in Carcliffe Castle's chapel and then set off for Devonshire. Home. A little shiver of delightful anticipation shook Arie. Her life was truly about to begin.

Lee slid his hands from her, causing Arie to look back at him questioningly. He just smiled and held out his hand. Pursing her lips, she slid her hand into his. They melted away into the darkness, leaving behind the other guests.

Arie had only a few moments to wonder where they were going. One hand held firmly in his and the other grabbing her skirts out of the way, she followed her husband up the snow-covered hill.

It had snowed all morning. All traces of the mishaps of yesterday had been wiped away by a clean layer of sparkling snow and ice. As they passed through the old tower's arched doorway, Arie felt a slight drop in her stomach. She determinedly did not turn her head to look into the room nestled between the inner and outer walls of the keep. Instead, she focused on Lee – the way the collar of his jacket was folded up to cover his neck so that the close weave of his black wool overcoat blended seamlessly into his short, dark hair.

Lee drew her into the center of the tower. The fresh snow had covered much of the rubble and the vines of ivy that covered the inner wall peeked out from behind the snow in a lovely lacy pattern. Above their heads, the moon was full and bright, bathing the entire circular space in a soft, silvery glow.

Arie did not wait for him to close the space between them. She slid her hands boldly over his shoulders, around his neck, and forced his lips to meet hers. She kissed him thoroughly, enjoying her privileges as wife and lover. Then she moved her hands downward, unfastening his coat and sliding her hands inside. But instead of upwards, she started unfastening his trousers.

Lee froze. "Are you serious? It is freezing out here!"

Arie grinned devilishly. "I know a way to warm us up." Making good on her words, she took him in her hands. Her gloved hands were cool, but it took just a moment of rubbing before the delightful

friction warmed them and he felt himself rising.

Lee slid his hands around her back and pulled her tight against him. He could do nothing else – he was completely hers, body and soul. Carefully he laid her down in the snowy grass, mindful of the strewn rocks and rubble. But Arie was hardly aware of the ground beneath her. She was much too focused on the hard length of him pressed against her. She reached down, kicking her skirts up and pulling him inside. They both cried out as he slid into her warmth. Neither could wait – one stroke, two, three and then they were both there together, collapsing into the soft snow.

“It’s truly magical,” Arie said with a sigh, wrapped in her husband’s arms.

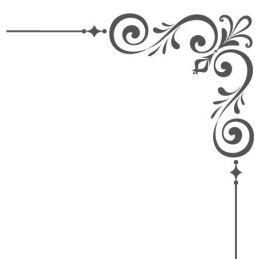
“After all of this, do you believe in fairytales? Or ghosts?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Come now. After all that has happened here at Carcliffe Castle – the locked doors, the flickering lights, the cold drafts ... you must believe.”

“I believe the castle has a mind of its own,” she allowed, echoing Madison’s words from so many days before.

“I don’t suppose I can argue with that.” Lee caught her chin with his finger, drawing her lips close to his. “Happy holidays, my love.”



Epilogue

Madison and Henry

“I cannot decide which is a bigger success – the ball or the bonfire.”

Madison glanced over her shoulder, sighing as her husband draped a heavy shawl over her shoulders. She was standing at the entrance to Carcliffe Castle, leaning against the six-inch thick wooden door which had been thrown open to encourage guests to move between the outside and inside festivities.

“Neither is as alluring as I’d hoped. Lee and Arie just snuck off to the old castle,” Madison observed with a wry smile. She nodded in the direction they’d disappeared but by now there was only darkness.

Henry slid his arms around his wife’s waist. “To be a newlywed,” he murmured.

“Because we are so elderly.” Madison rolled her eyes.

“You remember what it was like. No locale was off-limits – the carriage, the park ... the opera house.”

Madison narrowed her eyes as she looked up – high up – at her tall husband. “Are you implying we’ve gotten stale?”

Henry’s rich warm brown eyes twinkled mischievously. “Prove me wrong.”

She was not one to back away from a challenge – especially one of that nature. Glancing around one last time to make sure all the guests were well taken care of, Madison slipped back inside the house, not even bothering to glance behind her. She knew Henry would follow. Years of marriage had certain benefits.

She walked casually across the great hall, passing by the parlor and game room on either side. She did not glance into the ballroom. Instead, she walked through a wide corridor with a vaulted ceiling that was lined on either side with grandiose suits of armor. About halfway down the corridor, she stopped, turning around to meet her husband.

Henry needed no further invitation. He gathered her into his arms, gripping her bottom and lifting her so that her lips could reach his easily. Her hips had rounded with motherhood, making her even more delectable. Henry could not believe his good fortune – nor that he loved the woman in his arms now even more than he had when they

first wed. He adored this version of her: maternal, soft, and somehow even more confident.

Madison leaned into his kiss, reveling in his familiar warmth. Her heart flip-flopped inside her chest. She marveled for a moment at how she could still feel that rush of attraction and excitement even when she knew exactly what was coming and how it would be. He was touching her bottom, stroking the flesh through her gown. He knew how much she enjoyed being touched like that ... she moaned against his mouth.

They were still rather *out*; a wayward guest could easily stumble upon them. Reaching behind her, Madison felt around the stone wall. Her fingers found purchase on the latch and pushed down. Behind her, she heard the creaking sound of the doorway swinging open.

Henry carried her through the hidden door, expertly disguised to blend into the stone wall between two seemingly random sentinel suits of armor. He kicked the door closed and carried her over to the sideboard against the far wall, setting her atop it. It was the perfect height, raising her diminutive stature to meet his own much taller one.

Madison ran her hands through his long brown hair, watching as the candlelight reflected off and caused the hidden strands of gold to glow. How was there a candle burning in this secluded little windowless room? Had the servants known they would retreat here at some point? Did the servants even know about this room? Perhaps their secret place was not so secret after all. Or was it another trick of the castle?

Henry started kissing her neck and Madison gave up wondering. She would probably never know the answers and that was perfectly alright with her. All that mattered was the man in front of her now – her husband, her partner, her love.

Suddenly, she could not wait another moment to be joined with him. She brushed her skirts to the side and pulled him to her urgently. Henry was as ready as she. He freed himself from his well-tailored breeches and found her warm entrance. They both cried out as together they slid towards perfect oblivion, the sounds of their home jubilant and celebratory around them.



Meera and Christopher

THE SNOW AND STONE were cold beneath her – she'd have to change her dress for certain. There would be no hiding the wetness of her backside. But she did not care. Meera clung to Christopher as he thrust into her again and again. She cried out wantonly, then reached for his face and dragged him to her with both hands so she could kiss

him while they climaxed. She knew the moment he reached his peak, just a second before her. The deep guttural groan that tore from his throat pushed her over the edge.

Their bodies slowed until eventually they stood still, holding tightly to each other. Christopher pressed his forehead to hers, his breath coming in hot bursts of steam into the cold air.

"We should make ourselves presentable before Madison catches us," Christopher finally said, though he made no move.

Meera snorted. "Maddie is not as prim and proper as she would have you believe. I caught her and Henry sneaking off *several* times over the past week." But as she spoke, Meera sat up and pushed her skirts back down around her legs. Even wet, they were warmer than having her bare legs exposed. She was perched on the edge of a window sill a couple of feet off the ground. The room behind the glass she'd leaned against was darkened but just a few windows down were the shining lights of Carcliffe Castle's bustling ballroom. If someone had cared to look out, Meera suspected they could have easily seen her and Christopher. She smiled wickedly; that was part of the fun, after all.

Christopher finished righting his attire and then held his hand out to his wife. Taking it, she jumped down. She lost her footing in the slick snow, knocking Christopher down as well. They tumbled backward into the fresh layer of snow, landing without a sound. Other than the bubbling laughter.

Once that subsided, they both became aware that they were once again pressed together from toe to navel to nose.

"My arse is freezing," Christopher said ignominiously when Meera leaned down to kiss him.

Meera froze short of kissing him, her chest moving with laughter again. "Let's go upstairs and change." She rolled off of him and clambered to her feet.

Christopher groaned as he did, then grimaced. Meera turned back to him. "Is it your shoulder again?" She asked, her brow furrowed in concern.

His face set, Christopher rotated his arm and shoulder slowly, exploring the feeling. "It seems alright. Just a bit stiff. I don't think it will ever be the same – not after that beating it took in Cyprus."

Meera stifled a sheepish smile – it had been her fault he'd gotten into that particular altercation. Involving one very angry male mouflon.

She carefully took hold of his other arm. "Come, let's go upstairs and call for a hot bath. Then I'll rub it for you."

Christopher cocked an eyebrow at that overly generous offer. "Feeling guilty, are you?"

Meera's nose crinkled. "I wouldn't want you rethinking the adventures we have planned for the spring and summer."

"Twelve days at your sister's country estate was not enough to convince you to settle down?"

"Ha! Quite the opposite." She leaned her head on his shoulder as they walked arm in arm. "I love little Nora, and Henry's nieces and nephew are adorable. But I am very happy with things exactly as they are." Meera looked questioningly up at her husband. "And you, Christopher? Are you ready to settle into an idyllic country life?"

"Me? Settle down?" He tugged her tighter against him. "Never."



Kelly and Theodore

"WHAT ARE YOU THINKING about?"

Kelly snuggled even deeper into her husband's embrace. They sat in the window alcove of their suite amid a cozy nest of blankets and pillows. They'd long shed their formal evening attire for the softer warmth of dressing robes and nightclothes, which had quickly given way to soft touches and murmured endearments. They were now both divested of their clothing, their skin warm against each other beneath several layers of blankets. Below their window, they could see the bonfire burning brightly and various guests talking and mingling. Kelly watched as Lee led Arie off in the direction of the old castle ruins. Theo had relayed everything that happened there yesterday. Kelly shivered uncomfortably just thinking about it. Theo's arms tightened around her instinctively.

"I don't see Madison anymore. She must have gone back inside to check on the dancing," Kelly said.

Theo shook his head. "I saw her and Henry disappear inside together. I can guarantee you, they are not dancing."

Kelly chuckled against him. A movement at the edge of the light from the bonfire caught her eye. She nudged Theo and tilted her head in the direction of the couple walking arm in arm. "It seems that Christopher and Meera have had the same thought."

"Fools. I realized there were better entertainments hours ago." Theo leaned down and nuzzled her neck.

"I'm ready to go home." Kelly's eyes drifted closed.

"Me too," Theo agreed. "I am sure they got on well enough without us. But I will be glad to see the progress on the east wing of Middleborough Manor."

Kelly nodded. They'd spent the better part of the last year and a half doing the work of combining their neighboring ancestral estates. Middleborough Manor in particular had fallen into disrepair over the last several years. It had taken all of their time and energy to restore it

to its former glory. But things were finally settling down.

“We have one more project to complete,” Kelly said slowly.

She felt Theo tense behind her. “Oh no ... have you received word from your father? Did they find something else?”

Kelly reached for his hand where it sat upon her knee and laced her fingers through his. “Not that.” Slowly she drew his hand downward, finally letting it come to rest over her stomach. “This,” she said softly.

Theo sat up and leaned forward, nudging her head around so he could look into her warm brown eyes. “Truly? You are with child?”

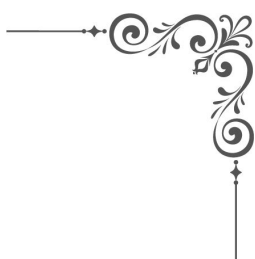
Kelly nodded. “We’ll have a baby by summer,” she confirmed. Theo’s face was inscrutable. Even after twenty years of friendship and almost two of marriage, she still had a hard time reading his emotions sometimes. He’d honed that skill too well. “Are you pleased?”

Theodore pulled her tightly against him. He kissed her forehead, her neck, her lips, and then drew back from her so he could drop a kiss on the still-flat panel of her stomach. “I could not be happier,” he said as pulled her back into his arms and kissed the top of her head.

“Thank you, Kelly. For this,” he squeezed her again - “for that,” he touched her stomach reverently - “for everything.”

“For you, always.” She leaned her head back against his chest, letting her eyes drift closed again.

Outside the window, snow slowly started to fall.



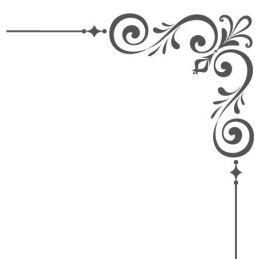
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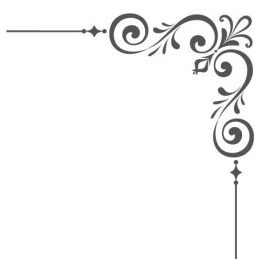
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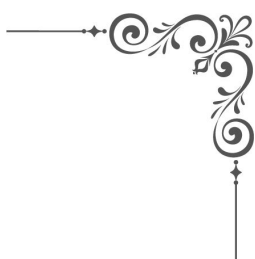
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One Race to Ruin





Chapter 1

H*e had to win.*

Eric Weathers had spent a small fortune to get them here – horse and rider on the racecourse, star trainer at the rail. It had to pay off.

It had to.

“He looks good, my lord.”

The horse and rider were still on the flat portion of the course. They started out at a more leisurely pace, fast but sustainable. By most standards it was a winning pace.

“Good is not going to be good enough.”

The ground was ideal today. It hadn’t rained for several days and the turf was firm. Perfect racing conditions. But there was never any guarantee of ideal weather. In April, in England, the exact opposite was true.

“He’s picking up the pace, just as I instructed him.”

The pair had reached the Dip – the fall and rise of ground that comprised the last two furlongs of the Rowley Mile. Even without a pocket watch in his hand Eric knew they were going to break their personal record. He felt his heart starting to beat faster. Maybe this was going to work after all.

As they approached the post, the sound of hooves and horse got louder. They roared past the two men watching at the rail.

“Minute forty-nine.”

Eric let out a long exhale. It was fast. Perhaps fast enough.

“He’ll run even better when there’s another horse beside him,” Taylor said, still leaning forward on the rail. His eyes were following the horse and rider, who had slowed to a trot and were circling back around. “He’s a competitive bugger.”

“Sounds a bit like his trainer,” Eric said drolly. His arms were crossed, as they had been for the entire ride. But some of the tension had gone out of him. It was a good time. Better than good. Just like he had said – better than good was what it would take.

Taylor just grunted. He straightened up as the big chestnut horse and rider came up in front of them.

“He was fast, I felt it,” Tommy said confidently from aboard the colt. When Taylor told him just how fast he let out a loud ‘whoop’ of excitement. “And he had more to give. I could feel it.”

“Hand him over to the groom. We can discuss it while they walk him out.” Taylor motioned forward the roughly clad lad who was waiting a few paces away. Other trainers and riders were starting to look at them. There was a certain level of comradery in training and racing, but ultimately it was a competition. No need to give anyone an edge.

“The start was a little slow. We don’t want to risk him getting boxed in,” Taylor said as the three men fell into step walking away from the track.

“I could have asked him for more sooner, sir. But I thought you wanted me to hold him back,” Tommy said.

“Yes, I wanted to see how much ground he could pick up on the rise. But when we take him out next we’ll have to push him sooner. To see if he can hold on.”

The exercise rider nodded in agreement. “I will talk with Chester before I leave today, sir. I will let him know how the ride was.”

Eric had been listening along. He trusted Jackson Taylor. He was a very well-respected trainer. Eric had paid an ungodly sum to steal him away from the Marquess of Hexham. It had almost physically hurt to part with such an amount, with the earldom in the state that it was. But it was an investment, Eric told himself. And thus far, more than two months in, he had agreed with everything the man said. But now his ears perked up.

“Talk with Chester? Why?”

“This is my last day, my lord,” Tommy answered. “I gave my notice to Mr. Taylor a few weeks ago ...”

“We will find another exercise rider, Tommy. Chester can handle him,” Taylor put in.

Eric scoffed aloud. “Are we talking about the same horse?”

“He’s going to have to take a jockey soon. We need to start accustoming him to other riders,” Taylor said boldly. But glancing over, Eric could see the look on his face. He spoke with confidence but the crease in his brow betrayed his worry.

Sighing, Eric looked back over his shoulder to where the groom was walking Mercury out. The huge chestnut colt was shaking his head, pulling at his reins as the young man walked. He was the most promising horse in Eric’s stable. And he had a reputation as a damnable tyrant. “Are you sure I cannot convince you to stay, Tommy?” Eric said wistfully, already bracing himself to expend another uncomfortable sum.

“I’m sorry, my lord. I’ve taken a job with a stable up in Doncaster.”

Eric gritted his teeth. “I’m sure I can match what they’ve offered you. Or better it.”

Tommy shook his head regretfully. “I’m that sorry, sir. But it’s not

a matter of pay this time. My wife's kin are from Yorkshire. Her mam's not well. She wants to be nearer with the young'uns."

"I see." Eric crossed his arms again, the tension returning. They would have to find a new exercise rider. Who could manage this hellion of a horse? Despite the turning in his stomach he knew that Taylor was right. If they were going to run Mercury in the 2000 Guineas he would need a proper jockey. The damn horse needed to learn to accept a new rider. And the sooner the better. "Well, I wish you and your family the best, Tommy. You've certainly done good work on that monster."

Despite being a middle-aged man, Tommy pinkened. It wasn't every day one got a compliment from an earl. "Thank you, sir." He tipped his cap respectfully.

Taylor cleared his throat, ready to steer the conversation back to the topic of strategy. "We need to get him out there with another horse. Perhaps we can pull Dynasty up next time and run them together, see how they play off each other –"

"Look out!"

"What the hell?"

"Someone grab that animal!"

They all started at the shouts around them and then the sound of hoofbeats came from behind, pounding past the three men.

"What the –" Eric turned just in time to see the flash of red-gold horse fly past them. "Hell and damnation!"

Tommy looked stunned, his eyes wide. Taylor was whistling as loud as he could, trying to call the horse to heel. Mercury's ears flicked back at the sound but his gait didn't falter. He was cantering alongside the track, while grooms, trainers, exercise riders, stable boys, and owners jumped out of his way. Even at a canter he was wicked fast.

"He's going to get injured! What the hell happened?" Eric turned back to where the groom had been leading the horse. The man was on the ground, a small coterie of others gathered around him. *Damn, damn, damn.* "What are we going to do?"

"We just have to let him run it out and hope the damn beast doesn't hurt himself." Taylor ignored the groom on the ground behind them and jogged after Mercury.

Eric felt the familiar ache in his stomach turn into something much sharper. *Was he never going to get a break?* He opened his mouth to speak "But—"

Another horse pounded past them, making all of them jump. Bystanders continued to jump out of the way as the horse, this one a dark bay, charged after the chestnut. At least this horse was mounted by a compact rider, Eric thought to himself. Though not one he

recognized.

The horse and rider were moving at a full gallop. They came up alongside Mercury, who was still loping along at a canter. If the chestnut colt had been galloping himself catching him would have been impossible. Eric recognized the dark bay from his own stable. It was the very horse that Taylor had just mentioned – Dynasty. The four-year-old was much more even-tempered than the fiery Mercury. And he had just been on his way out for his morning exercise so he had energy to spare.

Eric wasn't sure if it made him feel better or worse that now two of his horses were running pell-mell across Newmarket. At least if this came to disaster he wouldn't have to pay out another owner, he thought practically. But he could not afford to lose two of his best horses, either. Or this whole endeavor would end as quickly as it had started.

"He'll try and grab the reins," Taylor said. "To get ahold of Mercury."

As they watched, that was exactly what the rider aboard Dynasty tried to do. He leaned over and tried to catch the reins which were swinging wildly from Mercury's neck. But the horse seemed to sense a game; he shook his head and pranced away. The rider brought Dynasty closer and tried again. Mercury responded by increasing the speed of his canter. He was reaching for a gallop and enjoying the competition.

The rider brought Dynasty closer still. But this time he did not try to reach for the other horse's reins. He steered the dark bay closer and closer, as if they were running alongside each other at the rail like they would in a race. Even from a distance Eric saw the change in his stance, as the mysterious rider raised himself higher in the saddle.

It happened in a flash. The instant that the rider's body left the saddle there was a collective gasp from everyone watching. This was about to get a whole lot worse. And then suddenly, as if by magic, the rider was atop Mercury. Eric thought he might fall over. He had never seen such a thing in his life.

"I'll be damned," Taylor said beside him. The two men came to a stop, both stunned by what they had just witnessed.

Ever the gentleman, Dynasty was slowing to a trot and then a walk. He shook his dark head and turned from side to side as if looking for the rider that had gone missing from his back.

Now aboard Mercury, the mysterious rider managed to get ahold of the horse's reins. Mercury fought for a few seconds and then steadied. The horse slowed to a canter and then a trot. And then the rider was bringing him around, completely in hand.

Eric and Taylor reached Dynasty at the same time that the rider

brought Mercury alongside. The two horses touched noses, snorting and pawing their hooves at the ground as if congratulating each other on a grand adventure.

"That was some fine riding, young man," Taylor did not hesitate or hold back his praise. He grabbed ahold of the chestnut's reins, holding his bridle firmly and slapping the rider's knee congratulatorily.

"Thank you, sir."

Once Taylor had the horse firmly in hand the rider jumped down.

He was small, like all exercise riders and jockeys were. They had to be to meet the weight limits for the races. Eric noted that the young man was better dressed than most exercise riders he had met. He wore tawny breeches that were mostly clean, a cream-colored shirt, leather riding gloves, and a hunter green linen vest that was buttoned up over his shirt. His tweed cap was pulled low over his head. Perhaps the younger son of a middle-class family. Not taking on the family business, but certainly benefiting from it.

"Lord Fordham, this is Dani. We've just brought him on trial today." Taylor introduced the young man. As the lad turned his face up to the tall lord, Eric realized he was not much more than a boy.

"I owe you a great deal of thanks, Dani." Eric held out his hand. The young man stared at it, then extended his own awkwardly. Eric shook it, noting that the boy-man kept his eyes downcast. "You've saved me a significant investment, young man."

"He's a fine horse, sir," Dani said. His voice was still rather high-pitched.

"He's a pain in the arse," Taylor cut in. "But you've got a way with him. I hope you don't mind, my lord, if I take on young Dani here on a more permanent basis."

Dani flushed, an eager look in his young, dark eyes.

"I would say it is well earned," Eric agreed. "How old are you, boy? And where in the world did you learn to ride like that?"

The young man looked away and cleared his throat awkwardly. "I am nineteen, sir." Eric almost laughed aloud. There was no way. But he stuffed the impulse down as the young man continued to speak. "My mother was from Spain, sir. She taught me to ride in the Spanish style, sir."

He was being a bit effusive with the 'sirs.' He'd probably never met a member of the nobility, Eric thought to himself. Well, that hardly mattered. Gentility meant nothing aboard a horse, especially one with a temperament like Mercury. There was something else about the young man that made Eric want to look closer but he did not get the chance to explore that thought.

"You've found a rider to take my place!" Tommy said enthusiastically, joining the conversation.

Eric's eyebrows shot up. "I don't know about that, I think Dani here is a bit young –"

"There's no accounting for connection. The lad's got a rhythm with the beast already. We'd best accept our good luck and take what we have," Taylor cut in.

Looking between the three faces, Eric shook his head slowly in disbelief. He was not convinced. Dani may have claimed to be nineteen but he looked closer to fifteen or sixteen to Eric. But he had ridden like a professional. Better than most professionals, Eric had to concede to himself. "Alright then," he said slowly.

Tommy let out another happy '*whoop*' and threw his arm around the younger man. "Come on, Dani! I'll let you in on all of Mercury's secrets." Tommy steered the new exercise rider back in the direction of the stables.

Taylor watched them go, keeping a firm hold on the aforementioned devil.

"If that boy is nineteen, then I'm a Classics winner already," Eric commented. Taylor laughed beside him.

"That may be. But we've still got to find a proper jockey for this beast. At least one thing is squared away." Despite the horse's terrible behavior, Taylor gave him an affectionate slap on the rump. "I am going to see this wily boy put away myself. We can talk more later if you plan on staying around."

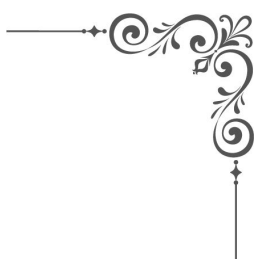
"I don't have any engagements in town until this evening. I'll wait."

Nodding, Taylor headed in the same direction as the two exercise riders.

Eric turned back towards the track. The morning exercises had resumed now that the spectacle was over. The groom who had been leading Mercury when he got away was on his feet now, a bandage wrapped around where the headstrong horse had tried to take a bite of his upper arm.

He took a deep breath as he walked back to the rail, taking up a position several yards away from where the other trainers stood with their pocket watches out and eyes trained on the track as the horses in their charge made their morning runs. The smell of horse, manure, turf, and sweat filled his nostrils. The sweet, earthy scent reached deep into his soul.

Eric had grown up on the racecourse and in the stables. He had learned about the sport at the heels of his father and grandfather. And now the reins were firmly in his hands, so to speak. He exhaled a long, slow sigh. He prayed he had what it would take to save it for his own sons.



Chapter 2

The garden door was her best bet. There would be too many people in the kitchen; servants tended to take their breaks down there, where samples of the evening meal or unconsumed dainties might be on offer. As a young child running wild across her family estate, she had often passed an afternoon in the kitchen. Of course, their household had been small by comparison to her aunt and uncle's. In her home, everything revolved around the horses. The house was more of an afterthought. Even so, the kitchen was always a bustling place.

So, no, she could not go in through the kitchen door if she had any hope of entering the house undetected.

It was nearly dark outside. The ride had taken her longer than expected to get back to her aunt and uncle's house in Cambridge. She would have to make sure she left the stables a bit earlier. It was unlikely that anyone would look for her before six or seven o'clock in the evening when they returned from paying calls and socializing. But if they did ... well, she needed to be here. She could not risk her aunt finding out about her little deception.

And what if she did? A small voice inside of her squeaked. The worst she could do was send her back to her father in the countryside. Which was exactly what she wanted more than anything else. *Perhaps that was not the worst thing.* Her Aunt Millie would probably enjoy devising a crueller punishment.

Pushing that thought aside, she slowly turned the handle to the garden door. By some miracle it did not creak. *Excellent.* Another point in favor of the garden as her main route of egress and ingress.

She peered down into the deserted hallway. To the left was the door to the kitchen; she could hear the sounds of pots and pans at work on the stove as well as the murmur of voices. She would need to be careful of disturbing the occupants. The hallway itself was dim as she slipped inside. The gas lamps that lined the wall had not been lit yet, but someone would be along soon. Another indication that she needed to time her arrival a bit earlier or risk running into one of the footmen lighting the hallway.

Taking care to step softly, she gripped her soft muslin skirt and lifted it above her ankles so there was no chance of tripping. She made it down the hallway successfully. On her right was the servants'

staircase to the upper floors. There were two more doors opposite that on the left wall; she was not sure where those went. Perhaps a pantry or wine cellar. She was fairly certain that the doorway directly ahead of her opened into the house's foyer. From the foyer, there were several connecting rooms: her uncle's study, the sitting room, the stairs to the next floor, and her aunt's morning room-turned sewing nook. If she appeared there, she could easily have been coming from any of those rooms. It would be quite convenient.

Much more convenient than trying to slip through the heavy front doors, which made the most onerous groan when opened. She had been fortunate to get through them undetected this morning.

The bag over her shoulder was perhaps the biggest wrinkle. There would be no need for her to be carrying it if she had just been loitering around the house. Well, she could work on a strategy for that tonight. There was nothing for it now. If she wasted any more time in this hallway, a servant was going to appear.

When she stepped into the foyer, her luck ran out.

Her aunt and uncle were coming down the stairs. *Drat, the one time she needed them to be somewhere else ...* She looked around frantically for somewhere to stash her bag.

There was a huge floral arrangement on the mirrored table against the wall. The staircase wound around the foyer in a graceful curve. In just a moment, her aunt and uncle would round the turn and she would be in view.

Without thinking twice, she shoved the bag into the blue and white delft-painted vase. Some water splashed out onto the table. She stood on her tiptoes and scooted her bum over the top of the table, feeling the water soak through her thin muslin gown, past her petticoat, and onto her leg.

"Daniela! There you are!" Her aunt exclaimed.

She forced a smile onto her face. Clasping her hands behind her back, she tried to cover her bottom as much as possible. The gown was a pale lavender muslin. She was sure that on her backside was a darker purple splotch of wetness.

"Good evening, Aunt Millie." Daniela smiled brightly. Her aunt gave her a curious look; her niece had been anything but happy since her arrival two weeks ago.

"Where have you been all day? We have hardly seen you." Millie paused to consider. *They had hardly seen her because they hadn't seen her at all*, Daniela thought to herself. But she was not going to correct her aunt.

"I spent most of the day in my rooms." She hoped the lie came off convincingly. She hadn't much practice at it. Before now, she'd never had cause to try. "I suppose I should return up there and get changed

..." Daniela glanced meaningfully towards the stairs.

"Yes, you ought. I will have some food sent up for you and Winifred. I imagine we will be out quite late tonight at Lord Harker's dance." Her Aunt Millie motioned up the stairs as if dismissing her. That was just fine.

Daniela edged around her aunt and uncle as they continued into the sitting room, carefully keeping her back away from them. As soon as they disappeared, she turned and ran up the stairs as quickly as her feet could carry her. One turn at the top, another left, and she was in her room. She felt a wave of relief course through her as the door clicked shut. She leaned her forehead on it and let out a slow, restorative breath.

"Whatever has happened to your backside, Daniela?"

Her face scrunched up instantly. Well, she was not as free as she thought. Slowly Daniela turned around, finding her younger cousin seated on the upholstered bench at the foot of her bed.

"*Dios mio*, Winnie, you gave me a fright!" Daniela decided to ignore her cousin's question. She instead walked calmly to her dressing table, sat down so the aforementioned backside was out of sight, and started taking down her hair.

"Mama says speaking Spanish is not fashionable."

"I am not exactly the fashionable type anyways." It was absurd the number of pins she had used to secure her hair. It was only as she saw the growing pile that Daniela realized it. Well, she did not want a single lock escaping. Her hair was too distinctive.

"Because you are red-haired?" Winnie looked at her sympathetically, twirling one of her own golden locks around her finger.

Daniela tried her best not to laugh. "No, Winnie. Because I do not care to *be* fashionable."

Winnie shook her head. "This is why you will never find a husband, that is what Mama says."

"Aunt Millie has a lot of useful opinions today, hasn't she?" Shaking her head, Daniela finally freed her long red locks. She reached up and massaged her scalp. *Tomorrow, fewer hairpins.*

"I hope I am not a spinster like you at nineteen." Winnie looked bereft at the thought. At seventeen years old, Winnie was the epitome of a young English rose: light blonde hair, clear porcelain skin, softly rounded figure.

"I hardly think being unmarried at nineteen qualifies me as a spinster." Daniela did not know whether to be annoyed or feel sorry for her cousin. To take everything her Aunt Millie said as gospel ... it must be exhausting.

Winnie had maintained her seat on the little bench, fiddling with

her fingers. Daniela hoped she would be on her way soon; she wanted to change into some dry clothes. And she needed to figure out a way to get downstairs and retrieve her bag from the vase. She would need to lay the contents out to dry ...

“What are you going to wear to Lord Harker’s party?” Winnie piped up.

Daniela shrugged. She hadn’t given the least bit of thought to it. “I am sure you must have decided by now,” Daniela said offhandedly as she started to drag her brush through her silky hair.

“I don’t want to wear the same color as you.”

This time Daniela did laugh out loud. “What color do you want to wear, Winnie?”

“Yellow.”

“Alright then, I promise I shall not wear yellow.” She wouldn’t have chosen it anyway. Daniela did not know much about fashion but she did know that yellow did not compliment her coloring. Despite her Spanish heritage, she had the pale skin afforded most redheads. Her shoulders and the bridge of her nose were spattered with light freckles that one had to stand quite close to see.

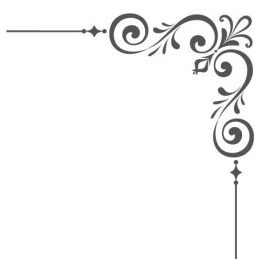
Winnie finally stood up. This must have been the reason for her visit all along, Daniela realized. How odd her cousin was. Well, if it would get her on her way, well enough. Winnie looked around the room as if unsure what to do next. Daniela decided to push her along.

“Would you excuse me, Winnie? I think I’d like to have a quick bath before we go out this evening.”

“Oh,” Winnie looked a little disappointed, an emotion which Daniela could not account for at all. She hardly knew her younger cousin – had only met her a handful of times before her father had sent her here a few weeks ago. And in that time, she had not gotten any closer to understanding the other young woman. “Alright then, I shall go.”

“See you soon,” Daniela called, continuing to brush her hair until the door closed on her cousin’s retreating back. “Ooof,” she let out a little sigh, sinking back in her chair. What a day. And she still had a whole night ahead of her.

For a moment, Daniela reconsidered her bath in favor of a nap. But then she caught a whiff of her own scent. No, she needed a bath. She smelled like horse.



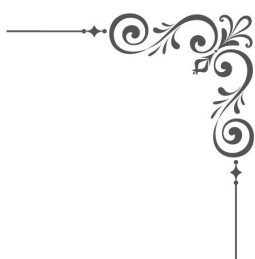
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About the Author

Bringing fresh perspective and punch to the genre readers already know and love, Cara Maxwell is dedicated to writing spirited heroines and irresistible rogues who you will root for every time. A lifetime reader of romance, Cara put pen to paper (or rather, fingers to keyboard) in 2019 and published her first book. She hasn't slowed down from there.

Cara is an avid traveler. As she explores new places, she imagines her characters walking hand-in-hand down a cobblestone path or sharing a passionate kiss in a secluded alcove. Cara is living out her own happily ever after in Seattle, Washington, where she resides with her husband, daughter, and two cats, RoseArt and Etch-a-Sketch.